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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

17 June 1987

Arab Politics: From Dormancy to Dynamism [redacted]

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Summary

Arab political maneuvering has intensified in recent months, as key regional players share a perception of movement on an Arab-Israeli peace process and the Iran-Iraq war. Moderate Arab efforts to narrow rifts within the Arab world, craft a joint Arab position on arrangements for an international peace conference, and strengthen Iraq's position vis-a-vis Iran are gaining momentum and meeting with some success. Some of the political shifts that have made this possible --particularly Syrian policy adjustments--may be only temporary, however, and are subject to reversal. [redacted]

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The moderates are pressing their diplomatic campaign despite continuing fundamental disagreements, within and between Arab and Israeli sides, over the modalities of an international conference and the central issues of land and peace. Moderate Arab leaders appear to view Israel's political deadlock and the PLO's unyielding rhetoric less as causes for despair than as challenges to try harder to achieve an Arab consensus on a negotiating formula. [redacted]

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Meanwhile, Soviet activism in the region has created the perception among Arab leaders that Moscow has been responsible for many recent political developments. The enhanced Soviet involvement complements some short-term US objectives but raises the prospect that Soviet influence in the Middle East will continue to grow. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 17 June 1987 was used in its preparation. [redacted]

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The strength and durability of these trends are uncertain. Still, we believe there is a good chance of the following developments over the next six months:

- Increased cooperation among Arab states on the Gulf war and on convening an international conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict, with Syria refraining from obstructionism.*
- Convening of a regular Arab Summit, with endorsement of a coordinated Arab position on arrangements for a peace conference.*
- Further strengthening of Iraq's political position vis-a-vis Iran.*
- Expansion of moderate Arab relations with Moscow, allowing the moderates increasingly to play the Soviet card to gain US cooperation.* [Redacted]

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Shifting Arab Fortunes

Narrowing Rifts. As a result of a recent easing of Arab tensions, the moderate Arabs probably sense an opportunity to make progress toward convening an international conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict and increase pressure on Tehran to end the Iran-Iraq war. [Redacted] US Embassy reporting, King Hussein's visits to Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and Riyadh have been aimed at healing Arab fractures, broadening Arab support for Iraq, and laying the groundwork for an Arab League summit meeting, where a unified Arab position on a formula for an international peace conference could be adopted. [Redacted]

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Arab bickering has prevented the convocation of an Arab summit since the Fez meeting in 1982. The Saudis--as designated host for the next summit and natural conciliators--have led occasional efforts to reconcile Arab differences sufficiently to convene a successful meeting. Now joined by King Hussein, these efforts have gained momentum. The urgency of these efforts derives from the moderates' desire to maintain movement toward an international peace conference, exploit increased Soviet activity in the region, and avoid being caught flatfooted in the face of unfolding developments in the Iran-Iraq war.

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--US Embassy reporting indicates that King Hussein and President Mubarak are working on lining up Syrian support for a negotiating strategy; Amman and Cairo plan to seek written Syrian commitments on conference modalities within the next several weeks.

--Egypt's relations with other Arab states have steadily improved over the past year. At the Islamic Summit in January--the most recent high-level regional forum--Egyptian President Mubarak was widely acknowledged as the star of the show. Assad held discussions with Mubarak--the first meeting between Syrian and Egyptian leaders since Cairo's estrangement from the Arab world following the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978.

--King Fahd brokered a Moroccan-Algerian summit in April. [redacted] the two countries probably will exchange ambassadors and normalize relations by early July, although apparently no progress was made on the Western Sahara conflict.

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--Moroccan and Syrian officials have initiated exploratory talks on the possibility of restoring full diplomatic relations. [redacted]

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Moderate Influence and Radical Weakness. The success of moderate Arab efforts derives in part from economic woes that have increased the appeal of Gulf aid and other financial inducements. We believe Syria's less strident positions reflect, in part, an attempt to play all sides for economic gain. Meanwhile, the Gulf states resumed aid to Egypt over the past year--an important step in Egypt's gradual reintegration--out of concern that economic problems in Egypt were leading to political instability and that Iraqi military setbacks might require closer security ties to Cairo. [redacted]

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Radical states in the region have also been weakened by a variety of other developments: Syria's problems in Lebanon and with the PLO, Libya's misadventures in Chad, Iran's inability to effect significant change in the Gulf war, and South Yemen's preoccupation with internal strife. All these states have been condemned internationally as supporters of terrorism. Syria, Libya, and Iran have been further weakened by bickering among themselves, particularly over policies in Lebanon, where there is a continuing risk of a showdown between Syria and the Iran-backed Hizballah. [redacted]

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The Islamic Summit highlighted the relative strength of the moderates. Iran sent no delegation because of opposition to its position on the war. Syrian President Assad showed up in return for Gulf Arab financial aid, but he was overshadowed by Mubarak. Libya's delegation, minus Qadhafi, faced tough arguments from the Arabs and Africans on Chad. [redacted]

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Syria's Pivotal Role. Damascus has been the linchpin of Arab relationships in recent years; its rejectionist positions have been largely responsible for the gridlock in Arab politics. We believe Syria's current political isolation and economic weakness are pushing

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Damascus to adopt a less strident regional stance, with primary examples being Syria's more flexible posture toward Iraq [redacted]

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[redacted] Syria could substantially reduce its isolation and receive a Saudi payoff by coming back into the Arab fold on the Iran-Iraq war issue; Syria is not blocking Arab League efforts to garner support for UN sanctions against Iran. Iraq, for its part, wants to break the Syrian-Iranian alliance and attain more unanimous Arab support in the war. [redacted]

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The trend in improved Syrian-Iraqi relations, however, is tenuous at best. Assad probably does not want to break relations with Iran, and he remains a bitter enemy of Saddam Husayn. Moreover, reduced tension between Hizballah and Syrian forces in Lebanon would reduce Syria's willingness to break with Iran and improve ties to Iraq. A Syrian reconciliation with the PLO would significantly increase Assad's overall bargaining position with the moderates and would encourage him to resort to obstructionism on the Gulf war as well as Arab-Israeli issues. [redacted]

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Iraqi Question Mark. A wild card in the shifting radical-moderate balance is Iraq. Formerly a staunch member of the radical camp, Iraq's more moderate stance in recent years has been driven by its reliance on Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and the small Gulf states for support in the war. While the Baathist regime in Baghdad is not about to abandon either its leftist ideology or its aspirations to assume the leadership of the Arab world, we believe the Iraqi position on an Arab-Israeli peace conference would be to support Jordan over the PLO--if an accommodation could not be reached between the two--and to stymie Syrian efforts to dominate the Palestinians. [redacted]

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The USSR: Being There

Increased Soviet activism in Middle Eastern affairs has created the notion within the region that Moscow has been responsible for many recent developments. We believe that over the past year the Soviets have skillfully dovetailed their Middle East policies with regional trends ripe for exploitation, and their actions have accelerated movement on several fronts.

- Expanded Soviet contacts with the moderate Arabs were made possible in part by growing Arab frustration with US Middle East policies and a general trend toward more balanced relations with the superpowers.
- The Iranian threat has become an increased concern for the Arabs, who have appreciated Moscow's increased political and military support for Iraq over the past several months. Baghdad has recently received Soviet MIG-29 aircraft, the first export of this advanced fighter outside Warsaw Pact countries, and Moscow has stepped up its rhetorical support for Iraq. This support came in the immediate aftermath of strong Gulf Arab dissatisfaction with secret US arms sales to Iran.
- Soviet success in helping craft a semblance of PLO unity was aided by the frustration of both moderate and radical PLO factions with their respective Arab benefactors, the preoccupation of most Arab states with the Gulf war, and Syria's isolation.

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- [REDACTED]
- Renewed Soviet calls for an international peace conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict followed the collapse of Jordanian-PLO efforts to form a joint negotiating team and King Hussein's decision to internationalize the peace process.
 - The small yet unprecedented Soviet security role in transporting Kuwaiti oil comes on the heels of increasing Iranian intimidation and a resulting Kuwaiti decision to seek extraregional involvement in the protection of Gulf oil tanker traffic.
 - Soviet pressure on Assad to meet with Iraq's Saddam Husayn coincided with growing Syrian displeasure over Iranian activities in Lebanon and intensive Arab lobbying to mend the Syrian-Iraqi split. [REDACTED]

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The Moderate Arab Strategy on a Peace Process

We believe moderate Arab leaders, particularly King Hussein, see Arab divisions--not Israeli or US policies--as the immediate obstacle to movement toward negotiations. Bitter rivalries among Arab leaders--frequently on issues far removed from the Arab-Israeli conflict--have made it impossible for them to agree on a concerted strategy in the past, but they now are searching for a formula for an international conference that they believe will force the United States to press for Israeli concessions. The formidable barrier that the current deadlock in Israeli politics poses to the convening of a conference will not, in our view, deter the moderate Arabs. Indeed, it may provide an extra incentive for Arab leaders to come to terms on a conference formula, in order to challenge Israel and the United States to participate. [REDACTED]

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The moderate Arab leaders almost certainly realize that there still are major difficulties to be surmounted before a conference is convened, and that the chances of a conference leading to a peace agreement are even more remote. The key actors continue to have sharp differences over the modalities and role of a conference. There is no indication that key Arab or Israeli leaders are ready to make the concessions necessary for a peace settlement, and it is highly unlikely that a conference forum could resolve to the satisfaction of all its participants the fundamental disagreements over the occupied territories, let alone the status of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. [REDACTED]

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But even the appearance of progress is important to moderates like Hussein and Mubarak, who need continually to demonstrate their support of Palestinian nationalism. Since Jordan has a large Palestinian population on the East Bank and Egypt is the only Arab state to have made a separate peace with Israel, Hussein and Mubarak probably believe they are obliged to pursue even slim opportunities for making progress toward restoring Arab control to part of Palestine. [REDACTED]

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King Hussein almost certainly believes Assad's hand has been weakened on Arab-Israeli issues, as evidenced by Assad's inability to prevent the convening of the Palestine National Council in Algiers in late April and by Arafat's ability to wean some of the radical Palestinian groups away from Damascus. The Jordanian leader probably will step up his efforts over the next few months to try to narrow differences between Syria and the moderates on arrangements for an international conference. He will use a combination of personal diplomacy and Saudi money to court Damascus. [REDACTED]

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Although the difficult question of Palestinian participation in a conference has yet to be worked out, moderate Arab leaders probably believe that coordination with Syria can produce a formula sanctioned at an Arab League summit that the PLO would have to accept or risk being left out of negotiations. Hussein and Mubarak probably believe that Arafat will soften his hardline positions to avoid being presented with a fait accompli, and that the PLO chairman would find it extremely difficult to oppose an agreement on Palestinian representation that was blessed by Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

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Prospects

We expect intense maneuvering and more tactical shifts in the coming months, which may clarify the strategies and objectives of individual Arab leaders. We believe there is a good chance for several significant trends and developments--some favorable, others unfavorable to US interests--over the next six months, including:

- Increased cooperation among Arab states, and less obstructionist Syrian policies on an international conference and the Gulf war.** There are likely to be further high level contacts among Arab leaders aimed at smoothing over differences. The combination of pressure and inducements for Syrian pragmatism from all sides will be intense. Trouble spots such as Libyan radicalism will remain, but will be peripheral to the Arab-Israeli and Iran-Iraq arenas.
- The convening of an Arab Summit, where a coordinated Arab position on arrangements for a peace conference, a strongly worded resolution critical of Iran, and some form of reintegration of Egypt probably will be endorsed.** Any agreement reached on a peace-seeking strategy probably would reaffirm the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people while leaving open the nature of Palestinian participation at a conference to give the PLO an opportunity to make concessions that would allow it to join. The moderate Arabs--and Syria and Iraq--will expect Washington to match their movement with a more active political role by pressing Israel to agree to attend a conference.
- A strengthening of Iraq's political position vis-a-vis Iran.** This will develop largely as a result of increased US and Soviet backing, Iraq's success in courting broader Arab support at Iran's expense, and the fraying of the Iran-Syria-Libya axis.
- A growing willingness of Arab moderates to expand relations with Moscow and to use the Soviet card to gain US cooperation on various regional issues.** Jordan, Egypt, and possibly even Saudi Arabia--in exchange for Soviet moderating influence on Syria and potential pressure on Iran and the PLO--will sanction a Soviet role in a peace process and expand bilateral ties. The moderates probably judge that the United States will be more supportive of Arab interests if Moscow is more deeply involved in peace-seeking efforts, believing that

[Redacted]

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Washington will not want the Soviets to assume the role of championing the moderate Arab cause. Kuwait's success in gaining the Administration's agreement to protect its oil exports followed its flirtations with Moscow about a major Soviet security role in the Gulf. Other moderate Arab states are likely to repeat similar tactics.

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SUBJECT: Arab Politics: From Dormancy to Dynamism [Redacted]

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