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OF KINGS AND CAPTAINS: MOROCCO, JORDAN, AND PROSPECTS FOR STABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Shai Franklin

Will the New Middle East "Cold War" Bring Greater Stability? / Morocco and Middle East Peace / An American Investment in North Africa / King Hussein's Palestinian Problem / Mutual Misunderstanding: A View from Jordan / Sister Cities? Amman and Jerusalem / The Foreign Service Dilemma

[Editor's Note: In June 1990, Shai Franklin visited Morocco and Jordan to speak with American diplomats, local politicians, and students in order to study the health of their domestic political systems and to better understand the "moderate" Arab perspective on the Palestinians and Arab unity, Israel, and the peace process. While he attempts to pinpoint important questions and draw occasional conclusions, his purpose is not to provide a balanced view of these issues but rather to lend insight into the mindset of the local players and political factors whose attitudes affect domestic stability in these countries.]

Will the New Middle East "Cold War" Bring Greater Stability?

The balance-of-power model assumes that each party sees the other side as a rational actor, at least to some degree. Yet such is not the case with Israel and the radical Arab regimes, particularly Iraq. The current view in Washington, especially in foreign service circles, is that the Middle East is edging closer to war. This contrasts with the idea that, as in postwar Europe, deploying weapons of mass destruction will enhance regional stability by raising the risks and costs of confrontation to an unacceptable level.

The United States relied upon its friends among the Arab leaders to exert a moderating influence at the recent Arab League summit in Baghdad. Their position -- and that of the United States -- was compromised on the eve of the summit when Iraq "leaked" State Department talking points intended for use in friendly Arab capitals. Billed as America's marching orders for its Arab

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puppet states, the Iraqi public relations campaign effectively precluded any attempts by moderates -- especially Morocco and Egypt -- to contain the tone of the summit resolutions wthout being denounced as U.S. collaborators.

King Hassan II and President Mubarak would prefer a restrained Arab response to recent international and regional developments for their own reasons, beyond seeking to shore up U.S. interests. Both leaders have invested considerably in the Arab-Israel peace process (Mubarak in particular), and both have entertained varying aspirations to pan-Arab leadership themselves. Neither has much to gain from Saddam Hussein's own play for military and political dominance. Yet Hassan, Mubarak, and, to a lesser extent, Jordan's King Hussein are thrust into a difficult position as American allies, between protecting U.S. interests, on the one hand, and publicly advancing the pan-Arab agenda, on the other.

Morocco and Middle East Peace

Morocco's Jewish community enjoys royal protection and maintains close cultural ties to France. Most young Jews continue their education abroad, eventually settling in France, Israel, or North America. From a one-time population of a few hundred thousand, Morocco's Jewish population has dwindled to no more than seven or eight thousand, though it remains a viable community with schools, social institutions, economic prosperity, and at least one restaurant in Casablanca which everyone agrees is kosher. One wonders whether this status will continue when Hassan is no longer king.

Hassan retains hopes of facilitating a peace settlement by utilizing Morocco's Jewish community as a conduit to Israel. His best-known achievement to date, Shimon Peres' 1987 visit to Rabat, is generally discredited for having no impact on the overall peace process. The event bought the king short-term headlines in the Israeli press, and he certainly sought to impress the Israeli public; but the audience he played to with at least as much anticipation -- the Arab world -- failed to see it as Hassan "delivering" Peres. In the long run, Hassan has incurred the wrath of radical Arab governments and Islamic revival movements for trafficking with Zionists. He has yet to reap any tangible benefits from such maverick diplomatic initiatives, but his efforts illustrate the importance many Arab leaders attach to the peace process as a means for gaining credentials and prestige among their peers.

The major issue in Moroccan politics today, as in the other Maghreb countries, is the transition to democracy; either change will be initiated from the top or the current system will give way to social and political upheaval. Islamic political assertiveness in Jordan and, more recently, in Algeria and Tunisia have insured that King Hassan will proceed with even greater caution than before. Western diplomats say the opportunity exists to develop a true constitutional monarchy if Hassan is willing to commit himself to that goal.

Along Casablanca's Atlantic shore, Hassan has committed tremendous resources to constructing a mosque in his name -- the largest in the world. The artificial peninsula designed to carry the massive structure has begun to sink under the sheer weight. If the king dies before its completion, will his successors finish the project -- a personal project of the king -- which has already cost Moroccan taxpayers considerably while denying them any say in its direction? The Moroccan ship of state faces a correspondingly uncertain future; should Hassan elect to involve the public in a democratization process that is truly empowering, the legacy he leaves may be realized; if he opts to include "the people" in name only, while clinging to traditional royal privilege in his own name, he could be perpetuating a regime which will scarcely survive him.

An American Investment in North Africa

Morocco is valuable to the United States notably as the key link to the Maghreb countries. More stable and with

a more unified sense of national identity than either Algeria or Tunisia, the former French protectorate is also more European, culturally and economically. Morocco is already forging strong private ties to the United States in the business and social sectors, but there will be no new aid packages forthcoming from Washington and the ball remains chiefly in the Moroccan court.

Though still uncommon, English is heard increasingly and language study programs are proliferating across the country. The political and business elite who once studied in France have begun sending their children to the United States to receive higher education. A delegation from the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation visited the country last autumn, and the king also agreed to allow American troops access to the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war. Morocco shows tremendous potential as a U.S. ally, but much will depend on its domestic political future.

King Hussein's Palestinian Problem

Jordan, while representing a less significant economic stake than Morocco, has maintained close diplomatic and strategic relations with Washington. It will always play a central role in the peace process because of its sizable Palestinian population and its geographic proximity to Israel.

King Hussein has distanced himself from Washington of late, for reasons that include personal disillusionment with the progress of the Bush/Baker-sponsored peace process, an impending drop in U.S. financial support and a corresponding reliance on Arab oil interests who must be courted, and a need to respond to popular sentiment in the wake of Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel. He also has reason to worry over the steady influx of Palestinians from the West Bank, and the possibility of a full-blown transfer cannot be far from his mind. Not unexpectedly, political survival remains Hussein's top priority; but he also appears to have a sincere interest in settling the Palestinian problem, beyond mere catering to public opinion. Ultimately, the Palestine issue can either bolster Hussein's regime or bring it down along with the 30-40 percent of Jordanians who are non-Palestinians.

Arab politicians trace the eclipse of the peace process to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's statement that Soviet immigration would necessitate "a greater Israel"; even for many in the United States, Shamir's remark evoked large numbers of Jews settling in the administered territories. Recent weeks have witnessed an Arab trend away from Jordan's political option and toward Iraq's military agenda. With the installation of the new Likud-led coalition government in Jerusalem, the freshly militant tone of the Baghdad conference, and Washington's suspension of its dialogue with the PLO, Arab politicians and American diplomats see little left to salvage.

Mutual Misunderstanding: A View from Jordan

On the Jordanian side, politicians seem genuinely perplexed by recent U.S. moves they see as rewarding Israel at Arab and Palestinian expense. While many say they do not oppose Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel per se, they perceive the Jewish state's ultimate goal to be sovereignty over all of "Palestine"; yet the United States does not appear worried over the Israeli government's alleged designs. When the nations of the world condemn Israel for specific abuses, the United States vetoes the passage of such resolutions in the UN Security Council. But, in this Jordanian view, one "little adventure" by a member of the PLO -- "in which no Jews were even killed" -- puts an end to the PLO dialogue with Washington, even when so many Arabs condemned the May 31 raid by Abul Abbas' Palestine Liberation Front. The PLO is described as a large organization, constrained by due process, which cannot be expected to expel one of its members overnight. In eulogizing Baker's points, they note that the State Department ignored near-unanimous Arab accep-

tance of the secretary's proposal. Arab observers claim an American double standard on human rights, and Jordanians are coming to believe that American Middle East policy emanates from the most extreme elements in Israeli politics, with Washington dutifully executing orders.

A Western-educated Jordanian politician defends Arab culture as alive and vibrant, even if the society has entered a phase of depressingly low leadership standards where men "think only of their thrones." While Arab culture may be legitimate, Jewish culture is viewed as either totally Western or totally Arab, being but a reflection of its host societies. For "real" Jewish values, one is directed to biblical accounts where Jews are instructed in the ways of war and slaughter.

While many Arabs may thus misunderstand and misrepresent Jewish culture and Israeli society, the Jordanian is offended by Western stereotyping of Arabs. They note that Arabs were not responsible for the Holocaust of European Jewry, Egypt even welcomed Jewish refugees in World War II, and that Arabs and Jews lived and worked side by side throughout the Middle East. They expressed frustration at the constant mention of a Holocaust they consider a footnote as historically irrelevant as the Balfour Declaration. Perhaps the Arab world was caught unprepared by the 1947 UN partition plan, but they say that the Arabs have adjusted and would now settle for less.

Even Jordanians with a more realistic view of the Middle East suggested that the terrorist who attacked a French tourist bus last May in Amman -- and perhaps even Abul Abbas -- was an Israeli agent. Nevertheless, many discount Hussein's warnings of Israeli plots to invade Jordan along with other Arab lands.

One possible sequence of events which might result in the overthrow of King Hussein and the current Jordanian political system was described as follows: While Israel and the United States would prefer a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, the Palestinians seek a state in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Jordan -- with a Palestinian flag. When even liberal Israeli politicians are unwilling to return East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank, the Palestinians will eventually look toward the East Bank and its Palestinian majority. Jordan, for its part, strives to infuse a Palestinian flavor into its society and political culture; in fact, the Palestinians there have an investment at all levels of society except for the royal family. Since the obvious obstacle to full political expression by the Palestinians is the king, this scenario anticipates his eventual overthrow.

Though many Palestinians might welcome an autonomous Palestinian state east of the Jordan River, they would not wish to give the Israelis and Americans an excuse to declare that Jordan -- and only Jordan -- is Palestine. Further complicating matters for Jordan, in addition to the Palestinian movement there are also the general threats to stability posed by the pressures of Islamic fundamentalism and pan-Arabism.

While the PLO campaigns for an independent Palestinian state, neither an East Bank nor a West Bank Palestinian entity would be considered viable on its own. Hussein's 1988 disengagement from the West Bank was originally interpreted as an expression of his frustration over PLO unwillingness to engage in any substantive peace process, as well as an opportunity to let the organization publicly embarrass itself by trying -- and failing -- to achieve any breakthrough on its own. In retrospect, his move was seen in Jordan as a recognition that the status quo was no longer tenable; there can never be a return to the same relationship, but this does not rule out the chances of a new constitution that responds to developments on the Jordanian and Palestinian scene. This year's elections are seen as an important step in the direction of political participation, one from which King Hassan might learn.

Sister Cities? Amman and Jerusalem

In Amman, the sense of permanence and stability contrasts with reports of the king's vulnerability, warnings of violent political upheaval, and the country's increasingly bleak economic performance. Hussein has ruled longer than any other leader in the Arab world and he is widely credited with transforming Jordan's economy into that of a modern state, by Arab standards. Class differences are less pronounced and volatile than in other moderate regimes such as Egypt and Morocco.

Amman and Jerusalem are in many ways sister cities; the cars are similar, buildings sport the same "Jerusalem" stone facing, streets are marked in similar patterns, and middle-class professionals work in comparable air-conditioned office buildings. East Jerusalem resembles central Amman and it is difficult to judge where one leaves off and the other begins. Travelers who cross the Allenby Bridge on Jordanian buses may then buy Israeli and Jordanian drinks with dinars or shekels at an Israeli-run snack bar, and pay in dinars for a cab to Jerusalem's Damascus Gate.

Jordanians freely offer advice to the Palestinians and the Americans. With half the Israeli population opposed to the new government, they say, the PLO should stick to its peace strategy, hold back on attacking civilian targets, and wait for a more moderate Israeli government to come to power. Had Washington been a little more positive toward the PLO, they claim, Abul Abbas might not have been re-elected at the last Palestine National Council meeting; even the militant George Habash had deferred to the PLO's new moderate stance. Anyway, the United States used the opportunity to discuss only secondary issues with the PLO, and Arabs never took the dialogue very seriously. But why should Washington now assist Abul Abbas in sabotaging the peace process?

The Foreign Service Dilemma

The suspension of even "marginal" relations with the PLO has dismayed many moderate Arab politicians who consider themselves friends of the United States. One said that no well-known, self-respecting Jordanian politician could conceive of attending the annual Independence Day reception at the American Embassy. Planned this year for July 2 in honor of the departing U.S. ambassador, local turnout will probably be disappointing. As usual, foreign service officers are thrust into the unenviable position of defending a locally unpopular decision they did not advocate, reached without their input, and which they perceive as a strictly domestic American political issue.

Though not representative of U.S. policy, there is an institutional disillusionment with the prospects for Middle East peace among foreign service officials. Bordering on resentment, this undercurrent stems from a lack of faith in the conviction of the regional actors on all sides to pursue the peace process, as well as feelings of powerlessness to influence official U.S. policy. The general feeling, among Arab politicians as well as American career foreign service officials, is that no "peace process" exists and that it is useless at this stage to try any initiative or take any risk.

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Shai Franklin, a graduate student in Middle East studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, is conducting summer research at the Jerusalem Center. His visits to Morocco and Jordan were supported by a David Kagan Fellowship.

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