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BRUCE MADDY-WEITZMAN
Editor

The Moshe Dayan Center
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The Middle East in 1997: Soft Coups for Hard Times

MARTIN KRAMER

The political year could be summarized simply: Khatami in, Erbakan out, Netanyahu and 'Arafat stuck.

Mohammad Khatami, the dark-horse candidate for the presidency in Iran, pulled off an astonishing landslide victory in Iran's presidential elections in May. His election was a symptom of deep disillusionment with the performance of the 18-year-old Islamic republic, and a sign of a widespread desire for a more open society. Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey's first Islamist prime minister, was bumped out of office in July by the Turkish military, which regarded him and his party as a threat to the secular character of the state. His removal indicated the deep suspicion of political Islam among Turkey's secularists, and their determination to keep an Islamist minority from dominating the country. Khatami's election and Erbakan's removal were both soft coups, done with the support of dissatisfied majorities which did not want to see their lives governed by the strictures of Islam.

Elsewhere in the ME, the pace of change seemed glacial. There were no dramatic breakthroughs, but no dramatic crises either. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process took a step forward with the Hebron agreement in January. It took the rest of the year off, as both sides repositioned. The old formula of "land-for-peace" had been discarded by Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, and replaced by "land-for-security." After Hebron, there began a bitter debate over both ends of this equation.

The eastern Arab world remained preoccupied by the unresolved future of Iraq. Saddam Husayn intensified his attempts to wriggle out of the UN sanctions straitjacket. Another weapons inspections crisis unfolded in October, but subsided a month later, without producing any substantive change in the positions of Iraq or the UN. In the western Arab world, the future of Algeria continued to concern governments and their oppositions. Here, too, it was difficult to say that the picture grew much clearer, although elections in Algeria suggested that the Islamists had lost the last of their mass following.

And how did the world relate to the region? The US and Europe continued to differ. The Europeans criticized the US for not expediting the Arab-Israeli peace process and for blocking Europe's return to Iran's lucrative markets. The Americans disapproved of the European habit of allowing commerce to drive foreign policy, and they criticized the European Union (EU) for turning a cold shoulder toward Turkey. In the meantime, the price of oil peaked, then plummeted, raising questions about long-term economic prospects for the entire region.

KHATAMI'S SURPRISE

Iranian politics remained an imponderable. Was this a militant Islamist regime? Then why did it tolerate a surprising range of free expression? Did a small clique of clerics dominate the state? Then what explained the apparent vitality of parliamentary politics? Wasn't the old guard determined to hold tight to power? Then what explained the election to the presidency of Mohammad Khatami?

For most of the spring, the world took little note of upcoming presidential elections in Iran, scheduled for 23 May. President 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, long a presence on the international scene, was set to depart after two terms. Most observers assumed he would be succeeded by the Speaker of Iran's parliament and the establishment's favorite, 'Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri. The list of presidential hopefuls was carefully pruned by Iran's Council of Guardians, to eliminate any serious challengers. The only figure of any note to survive the cuts was Mohammad Khatami, a former minister of culture with a reputation for moderation. But who would vote for someone as obscure as Khatami? And wouldn't the conservative elite take the necessary measures to assure the election of their man, Nateq Nuri?

On 23 May, 29m. Iranians cast their ballots — an astonishing turnout of 91%. And they presented Khatami with a landslide victory: he received 69.1% of the vote. Obviously, something profound was underway just beneath the surface of Iranian politics. The nature of that something preoccupied Iran-watchers for the rest of 1997.[1]

Khatami himself was hardly a firebrand opponent of the existing order. On the contrary, he was a typical product of it: a cleric who over the years had been tapped by the Islamic regime for a host of lesser tasks. He had the reputation not of a dissenter but of a pragmatist. But at the polling place, the discontented concluded that casting a ballot for Khatami constituted the most effective form of protest open to them. The support for Khatami came from wide sectors of Iranian society which felt excluded from power. He enjoyed massive support from women, who feared the loss of freedoms; the young, who feared the despair of joblessness; the technocrats and the intelligentsia, who feared isolation from the world; and, paradoxically, assorted radicals who resented their marginalization. On 4 August, Khatami assumed office.

The world eagerly awaited change from the man quickly dubbed by the Western press as Iran's Gorbachev. But Khatami was only president, and the presidency in Iran was simply one of many power centers, and not the most important one either. The supreme leader, or *rahbar,* Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i, still called the foreign policy shots, controlled state intelligence, ruled over the judiciary, and set the overall moral tone. The parliament, also dominated by conservatives, passed the legislation, which was then vetted for its conformity to Islam by a special council. Then there were the powerful and well-endowed foundations, which commanded budgets comparable to that of the state. If there were any doubts about the enduring clout of conservatives, they were dispelled by the trial in 1997 of the reform-minded Tehran mayor, Gholam-Hosein Karbaschi, one of Khatami's staunchest supporters. Targeted by the conservatives, he was subjected to sustained judicial persecution for his alleged corruption. Khatami had received a mandate to effect change, certainly in the domestic sphere. But he faced an uphill battle.

ERBAKAN'S DEMISE

The confrontation between Islamists and secularists grew acute in Turkey in 1997. The previous year, Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey's first Islamist prime minister, had made a few tenuous moves toward implementation of his program. But came Ramadan in January 1997, he was inspired to take bolder steps toward implementation of his program, in the face of opposition from the secular elites and the military. This proved to be his undoing.

During Ramadan, Erbakan announced that he would keep his election promises to lift the ban on headscarves on campuses and public buildings. For secularists, the headscarf was a red flag, the ultimate sign of defiance of Atatürkism, which had always put great symbolic store in attire. As if this were not enough, Erbakan said he would move forward on another promise, to build new mosques in the two most visible epicenters of urban Turkey: Taksim Square in Istanbul, and the Çankaya district of Ankara, neighborhood of the presidential palace. Istanbul, of course, had a plethora of mosques, and Ankara possessed the massive Kocatepe mosque complex. Constructing mosques in Taksim and Çankaya would be an invasion of secular space.

The response was not long in coming. On 28 February, the National Security Council, a forum for the government and the military, met for a marathon session, in which the generals put 18 demands before Erbakan. The list included strict implementation of laws banning religious attire, and, above all, closures of Qur'anic and religious schools. This was a carefully planned invasion of Islamist space, for the principal avenue of Islamist propaganda had been the network of Qur'anic and religious schools, many of them funded by the state. Only after several days' delay did Erbakan sign the document, but in doing so, gave every indication that he would work to undermine it.

In May, the Supreme Military Council expelled 61 officers (including three colonels) and 100 noncommissioned officers from the armed forces for their Islamist ties. Again, a reluctant Erbakan had no choice but to endorse the move. Then the state prosecutor moved to have the constitutional court rule Erbakan's Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*; RP) unconstitutional, based upon various public statements by its leaders. This measure was the obvious prelude to a banning of the party, of the sort which had happened in the past. Erbakan concluded that his best move would be to "rotate" the premiership with his coalition partner, Tansu Çiller. On 18 June, he resigned, but tried to persuade President Süleyman Demirel to appoint Çiller as caretaker prime minister until new elections. But Demirel instead summoned opposition leader Mesut Yılmaz to form a government, which he did by mid-July. On 16 August, parliament passed a bill that closed most religious schools, the first step toward dismantling the apparatus of the RP. In August and December, another 135 military personnel were dismissed for being tainted with Islamist sympathies. Many more steps would come.

Turkey's brief experience of Islamism in power raised more questions than it answered: about the fragmented state of Turkish politics, the ability of a minority to impose its agenda, and the political veto exercised by the military. The episode had taken Turkish democracy to its outer limits. But the biggest question was this: did the removal of Erbakan weaken or strengthen the long-term prospects of political Islam in Turkey? The year 1997 provided no answer to that question, but it would loom larger with each passing month.

When the military was not combating Islamism, it was fighting Kurdish separatism. In May, Turkey launched a six-week offensive ("Operation Hammer") against the northern Iraqi bases of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), in cooperation with Mas'ud Barzani's Iraq-based Kurdish Democratic Party. In late September, Turkish forces entered northern Iraq again, in "Operation Twilight." Kemalism was fighting a two-front battle — and, in 1997, looked to be winning on both.

ARABIA INERTIA

No power changed hands in the Arab world in 1997. Unlike Israel, which witnessed a change of government in 1996, or Turkey and Iran, which saw shifts among rival power centers in 1997, the Arab world remained confined to its usual groove. In some places, there were elections, the outcomes of which were foregone conclusions. Elsewhere, little changed.

Yemen, one of the Arab world's least developed countries, where there were four or five guns for every inhabitant, had emerged since the 1990 unification of north and south as one of the more pluralistic political systems in Arabia. How long it would remain so seemed less certain in 1997. On 27 April, Yemen held its second multiparty elections for parliament, which returned an overwhelming victory for the General People's Congress, the party of Yemeni president 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih. This outcome was largely a result of a boycott by major opposition parties.

On 5 June, Algeria held parliamentary elections — the first since the aborted elections of 1991. According to Amnesty International, 80,000 people had died since then in the ongoing civil war, and violence continued in bloody spurts in 1997. But elections proceeded peacefully, with a turnout of almost 66%. The result was a multiparty parliament dominated by the proregime National Democratic Rally, and including two tame Islamist parties. The government now felt free to release detained *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) leaders 'Abd al-Qadir Hachani and 'Abbasi Madani, and in September the armed wing of the FIS announced a cease-fire. But there were plenty of other armed Islamist groups, and their violence continued unabated, especially in outlying areas.

In the monarchies, too, there were no electoral surprises. On 4 November, elections were held for the lower house of Jordan's parliament. Islamists, who had once formed a formidable opposition bloc in parliament, boycotted the elections over a new press law and the existing Electoral Law, and were joined by other smaller left-wing and Arab nationalist parties. In the end, progovernment independents took 62 of the 80 seats, with a turnout of 55%. If a monarch chose not to dominate a parliament through one party, he could always encourage complete fragmentation of a parliament. Morocco's parliamentary elections of 14 November produced a hung parliament, with each of the three major blocs receiving a third of the seats. King Hasan thus remained the sole unifying force in his realm.

Elsewhere, opposition movements seemed to be much on the defensive. In Egypt, the regime kept Islamists moving through the courts and the prisons (there were some 20,000 security prisoners), and there was much evidence of fragmentation of groups under pressure. But violence could surface unexpectedly at any time. In Upper Egypt, Islamists massacred Copts on two occasions in January and February. In central Cairo in September, two brothers attacked a tourist bus in front of the Egyptian

Museum, killing nine German tourists and the Egyptian driver, and in October, 11 persons, nine of them policemen, were killed on a train. But the most brazen act of violence took place on 17 November, when six gunmen massacred 58 tourists and four Egyptians in the Valley of the Kings in Luxor. (Only a month earlier, tourists had been wooed by the staging of a production of Verdi's *Aida* at the site.) The interior minister resigned the next day. Still, the violence looked more like a last-ditch effort than a revival of the violent Islamist campaign of the early 1990s.

Saddam Husayn's survival continued to defy the odds. A leading economist estimated that the impact of the Iran-Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the UN-mandated sanctions had destroyed all the advances made by Iraq from 1950 to 1980.[2] Iraq's industries were working at 10% capacity; per capita income had been slashed in half several times over. Since 1990, the average price of basic foodstuffs had climbed 5,000%; a kilo of meat cost the monthly wage of a schoolteacher. Staples such as bread and rice were rationed. According to UNICEF, there were nearly 1m. malnourished children in Iraq, including a third of all children under the age of five. The only economic thread of the regime was oil exports — a meager 1.3m.–1.5m. barrels per day (b/d) of oil, as compared to the precrisis 3.3m. b/d–3.5m. b/d, or the 1990 five-year-plan projected output of 6m. b/d. Yet despite this disastrous performance, the regime seemed firmly in the saddle, and the Iraqi opposition remained in disarray.

The Palestinian Authority (PA), moving ever-forward in building the machinery of state, followed the established Arab pattern, within unique parameters. As one journalist put it, "the PA operates as a kind of civic government, royal family, major conglomerate, and military junta all rolled into one."[3] The annual budget of the PA, approved during the year, stood at $866m., of which $343m. went to 'Arafat's office and his security services. Funds which did go to the nascent ministries were often wasted; the first report of the PA's general audit office found that some $326m. had been misused or wasted by ministries.[4] A special committee of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) reported to 'Arafat that corruption was endemic in the ministries, and recommended criminal charges against two ministers.[5] Corruption was encouraged not only by the rentier character of the PA, but also by a steady economic decline since Oslo.[6]

The human rights situation also came in for sustained criticism, at home and abroad. Arbitrary arrests, lack of judicial procedure, even torture — all these opened the PA to criticism. Typical of abuses was the arrest of noted Palestinian journalist Da'ud Kuttab, who was detained for a week in May. His offense: transmitting on his Jerusalem-based television station a session of the PLC in which speakers denounced corruption. But there could be no doubt that the PA, like Israel, was being held to a higher standard. "Syria and Iraq are dictatorships," noted a Palestinian observer. "They have a single leader with a single ideology who wants to promote a single mindset. We have an authoritarian leadership, with marked concentration of power, but we do have a certain flexibility. You don't automatically go to jail. You may get arrested by the PA to teach you a lesson. But they don't hang you for expressing your views."[7] Certainly by prevailing standards in the Arab world, the PA had one of the better records.

The most interesting challenge to the Arab status quo came not from opposition movements, but from the Qatar-based satellite news broadcasting channel, al-Jazira. The station, which had begun broadcasting in November 1996, became famous in

1997 for its gladiatorial debate programs, pitting advocates of diametrically opposed positions against one another. The station provided a kind of fare otherwise unavailable anywhere in the Arab world, and in particular gave Arab intellectuals in the West a ready outlet for their views. Satellite television was a growth area (advertising revenues on Pan-Arab satellite television stations doubled from 1996 to 1997, to $200m.), but it still remained a tool in the hands of governments. Saudi Arabia had the greatest stake, in the well-established ME Broadcasting Center (MBC), and even al-Jazira was financed by the Qatari Government. The Arab world possibly stood on the brink of a satellite war, but it more likely would be conducted among the rulers than between the rulers and the ruled.[8]

Authoritarianism continued to distort Arab priorities, manifested in every statistical accounting. In 1996, adult literacy in Arab countries stood at 54.7%, compared to the 70% average for developing countries. Only 40% of women were literate. Yet ME and North African states imported 40% ($15bn.) of the weapons sold worldwide in 1996 (Saudi Arabia, $9.1bn.; Egypt, $2.3bn.; Kuwait, $1bn.; Israel, $900m.).[9] Distorted priorities had been maintained into the 1990s by a rebound in oil prices, which wavered through 1997 in the range of $18–$20 a barrel. But from mid-1997, the East Asian economic crisis began to eat into world consumption. By the end of the year, oil prices had begun to drop. (They would be halved in 1998.) The pressure to reorder priorities grew as incomes dropped, but still was not sufficient to undo the double bind of authoritarianism and militarism that were the hallmark of modern Arab politics.

ISRAEL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The early 1990s had seen Israel jolted by a series of peace agreements without precedent — and by a string of terrorism acts likewise without precedent. The Israeli public, in electing Binyamin Netanyahu as prime minister in 1996, seemed to signal that it wanted some relief from both. To the standard political lexicon, dominated by "peace" and "security," the Netanyahu government added a new word: "reciprocity." It was not without appeal. "Peace," for which all Israelis yearned, became identified in the wider public with the left, which worked hard to turn "peace" into a partisan slogan. As for "security," even the generals (especially retired ones) could not agree on its requirements. But "reciprocity" had an elegant simplicity. If the Arabs gave, they would get; if they did not give, they would not get. One did not have to be a visionary or a general to understand this. Netanyahu, who made "reciprocity" his slogan, was neither.

But Israeli policy often seemed to reflect the will of those whose slogans had nothing to do with "peace," "security," or "reciprocity," but which came from the lexicon of the "Whole Land of Israel." At the end of the day, Israel's government was a prisoner of the right-wing parties that assured its majority. Yitzhak Mordechai, defense minister, explained his own government's "inability to take decisions" in this way: "Of course it's the right-wingers. We would have an 80–90 [member] majority in the Knesset for taking the peace process forward. But the right-wingers are forcing policies on the government which afterward cause serious security problems."[10] Throughout 1997, then, Netanyahu tried to keep the Israeli right satisfied (if grumbling) with (promises of) new settlements, while mollifying the Americans by move-

ment (sideways if not forwards) in the peace process. In fact, not much moved anywhere — a stratagem by which Netanyahu also remained firmly at the helm.

PALESTINE POSTPONED

When it came to the Palestinians, it had long been Netanyahu's claim that they knew only how to take, not to give. They took Israeli territorial and political concessions, yet they refused to end incitement and terrorism. From here onwards, nothing would be conceded without a quid pro quo — not in words, but in deeds.

But there was a problem: existing Israeli-Palestinian agreements. Among those inherited by Netanyahu in 1996, the most pressing involved Israeli redeployment from Hebron. Hebron had long been a point of conflict between Jewish settlers and Palestinians, and remained the one West Bank city under complete Israeli control. A Hebron redeployment had been negotiated by the Labor government, but then-prime minister Shimon Peres had declined to implement it in the midst of an election campaign (which he lost). It now fell to Netanyahu to implement an agreement he himself had denounced while in opposition.

The Hebron redeployment constituted a specific Israeli commitment. But Netanyahu thought the existing agreement defective on crucial points, and while the broad commitment stood, he set out to renegotiate the agreement's finer points. Behind the scenes, the US diplomatic team headed by Dennis Ross worked overtime to bridge the new gaps between the sides. King Husayn of Jordan also made a decisive contribution, flying to Gaza, and then Tel Aviv, to save the talks from collapse. On 15 January, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators finally signed the redeployment agreement, which received the approval of Netanyahu's cabinet (by a vote of 11 to 7) and the Israeli parliament (by a majority of 87 to 17). 'Arafat and his security forces entered Hebron, and Israel released Palestinian women prisoners.

The Likud government cited 11 supposed improvements over the Hebron agreement negotiated by the previous Labor government. Labor politicians said they saw none, or at least none worth the time and good will lost in the renegotiation. For the hard right, however, both the original agreement and its revision constituted capitulation. A parliamentarian from one of the right-wing coalition parties made clear the expectations of the right after Hebron: "Netanyahu will have to show movement soon on actual building in Jerusalem, or we'll reconsider our position."[11] Seventeen parliamentarians of Netanyahu's own coalition demanded a new building campaign in exchange for their continued loyalty.

The campaign was not long in coming. In February, a government planning committee announced that bulldozers would begin work on building a settlement at Har Homa/Jabal Abu Ghanayim, on the southeastern outskirts of Jerusalem. The new Jewish neighborhood, planned for 6,500 housing units, would effectively sever East Jerusalem from Palestinian-controlled Bethlehem, making it difficult to create any possible territorial link between the Arab quarters of Jerusalem and areas under Palestinian rule in the southern half of the West Bank. The first stage of construction involved 2,456 units on mostly Jewish-owned land which had been expropriated by the state.

Palestinian politicians hinted that there might be another explosion, reminiscent of the widespread outbreaks that followed the opening of an archaeological tunnel in Jerusalem in September 1996 (see *MECS* 1996, pp. 49–50, 156–57, 376–77). Jordan's

King Husayn also sent a letter to Netanyahu, warning that the construction would "undermine the whole peace process and trigger anger that will unleash violence."[12] Even US President Bill Clinton, receiving 'Arafat at the White House, disapproved: "I would have preferred the decision not to have been made because I don't think it builds confidence."[13] But Israeli policy and prestige were now thoroughly invested in the Har Homa project, and work began on the site on 18 March. "Palestinian security cooperation was buried with the first bulldozer that went up on Jabal Abu Ghanayim," announced the Palestinian security chief for the West Bank, Jibril Rajub.[14]

Palestinian extremists tried to seize the moment, perhaps taking advantage of the lapse in security cooperation. In March, three days after the bulldozers rolled at Har Homa, three women were killed by a Hamas bomber in a Tel Aviv café. In July, 14 died and 170 were injured in a Hamas double-suicide bombing in Jerusalem's main market. In September, three Hamas suicide bombers killed five Israelis in a Jerusalem pedestrian mall. Hamas believed it had received a "green light" from 'Arafat, according to the head of Israeli military intelligence. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, on the other hand, had her doubts: "There is clearly a perception of the green light," she said cautiously, "but no concrete evidence."[15] The Israeli Government dug in its heels: there would be no further progress while Palestinians wanted by Israel roamed freely in areas under Palestinian control, and while Hamas openly incited violence against Israelis.

In September, a similar "settlements" crisis developed when three Jewish families moved into the exclusively Palestinian neighborhood of Ras al-'Amud in East Jerusalem. They had rented their accommodations from Irving Moskowitz, an American millionaire who had bought up property in the Arab neighborhood through his own foundation. Crisis loomed. But this move had no official authorization, and was quashed a few days later. (The families were replaced by caretakers who were not allowed to reside in the houses.)

In the midst of mutual recriminations, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations came to a dead stop. The PA blamed Israeli stalling and settlements. The Israeli Government blamed Palestinian indulgence of violence and terror. During a September visit, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it bluntly: "The crisis of confidence is worse than I thought — [confidence is] fairly tattered."[16] In the absence of meaningful negotiations or sustained security cooperation, the US stepped into the breach, interposing the CIA as a monitor of Palestinian security measures. Only in October did Israel and the Palestinians resume formal negotiations, after agreeing to an American proposal for a "time out" on "unilateral acts." What constituted a "time out" or a "unilateral act," however, remained points of disagreement.

Yet there was never any prospect of war or its lesser variations. There were too many vested interests on both sides to risk violent confrontation. The Hebron agreement signaled Likud acquiescence of the inevitable: the land would be partitioned. It was now a matter of percentages, not principles, and who would fight and die for percentages? And 'Arafat's patience seemed likely to outlast even him. He now sat on a chunk of Palestine, and there was every prospect he would get more — if not from this Israeli Government, then from another one. Why fight and die now for what could be negotiated later? In an imperfect world, this looked like progress.

UNQUIET BORDERS

Elsewhere, Arab-Israeli relations also had their customary ups and downs, but there were no marked deviations from the norm. In South Lebanon, it was guerrilla war as usual. Israel and Hizballah, Israel's Shi'i nemesis, both kept "understandings" reached in previous rounds. Ironically, it was an accident which claimed the most Israeli lives. On 4 February, two Israeli helicopters embarked for Lebanon collided over northern Israel, killing 73 servicemen. Although the troops were not killed in battle, the accident rekindled the Lebanon debate in Israel. That debate was fueled throughout the year by the deaths of 39 Israelis, killed while maintaining Israel's "security zone" in South Lebanon. The casualty list was the longest of any year since 1985, when Israel established the zone in its present configuration, and included 12 soldiers killed in one commando operation that went awry.

On the one side stood a movement of soldiers' mothers and a small group of politicians from both Labor and Likud, who favored a unilateral withdrawal. Israel could defend itself from behind the international border, they argued, and if Hizballah dared attack across it, Israel would have a license for massive retaliation. On the other side stood the military establishment and most of the civilian leadership, who argued that in the absence of Lebanese and Syrian guarantees, any withdrawal would return the northern border to the wild state that existed in the early 1970s. The Lebanon debate always seemed to lead — like everything else in Lebanon — back to Damascus.

And there, in what might be called the "bigger picture," neither Israel nor Syria had much incentive to move. The talks between the two had broken off in 1996 under the previous Israeli Government, and a formula for their resumption still eluded both sides — probably because neither side was prepared to make the essential concessions. In February, Israeli Defense Minister Mordechai said he expected talks with Syria to resume in spring, and Foreign Minister David Levy echoed his optimism. The breakthrough did not materialize, but neither were there any war scares reminiscent of 1996. Israel was busy with the emerging quasi state of Palestine, Syria was preoccupied with the reemerging quasi state of Lebanon, and both preferred to postpone their moment of reckoning.

Paradoxically, the more tested track of Jordanian-Israeli relations turned out to be a roller-coaster right through the year. Theirs was supposed to be the "warm peace," as distinct from the "cold peace" between Egypt and Israel. But it was King Husayn who gave the peace its warmth, and in 1997 the cold winds buffeted his policy. An indication came on 8 January, when the first Israeli trade fair in Jordan was greeted by Jordan's largest public protest since the 1991 Gulf War, supported by 20 of Jordan's 23 recognized political parties. Few in Israel had realized the extent of erosion in public support for King Husayn's "warm peace."

Then, on 13 March, a lone Jordanian soldier opened fired on group of Israeli schoolgirls visiting the "Island of Peace," a tourist zone on the Israeli-Jordanian border. Seven schoolgirls were killed. This threatened to become a crisis when Israeli Foreign Minister Levy suggested that the king's own criticisms of Israeli policy had "created a psychological atmosphere that could lead to such acts." Three days later, King Husayn crossed to Israel to visit the families of the dead and to offer condolences. It was a timely gesture, which dispelled the tension.

The relationship then hit another speedbump over Hamas. For Israel, Jordan had become a convenient storage site for exiled Hamas activists. They were kept under

close surveillance by the Jordanian authorities, and could not issue public statements. During the year, for example, Israel accepted a Jordanian solution in the case of Musa Abu Marzuq, a Hamas leader arrested in the US in 1995. Israel had sought Marzuq's extradition, then dropped the request, fearful lest it prompt a wave of Hamas violence to free him. On 5 May, the US deported Marzuq to Jordan, which, in the circumstances, suited Israel just fine.

But then the Israeli Mossad overstepped. On 25 September, two of its agents, posing as Canadian tourists in Amman, attempted to assassinate Hamas activist Khalid Mash'al by lethal injection. They were caught in the act, prompting a severe deterioration in Jordanian-Israeli relations. King Husayn described the bungled attempt as "a reckless act carried out by a party that does not want the peace process to continue and wants to poison the atmosphere."[17] In the end, Israel had to deliver not only the antidote to the injection, but also Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, then serving a life term in an Israeli prison. Yasin was released to Jordan, whence he made his way to Gaza, where he was enthusiastically received by a crowd of 30,000. (Jordan also secured the release of another 70 prisoners.) Nor would Jordan be satisfied until Israel ousted Mossad chief Dani Yatom — a result finally achieved via the recommendation of an Israeli commission of inquiry. It was remarkable how Israel and Jordan, which had waltzed together for so many years, still managed to step on each other's toes. The shared interests that bound the two could survive these missteps, but bilateral ties could not advance to new levels in the midst of so many "incidents."

Egypt and Israel also grew distant. It was not simply that the peace between the two remained "cold." Egypt did what it could to prevent other Arabs from moving down the path of "normalization" it had already paved. On 31 March, the Arab League Council, meeting in Cairo, decided upon a suspension of political, economic, and cultural "normalization" with Israel — the carrot held out to Israel in return for occupied lands. Syria led the effort, but it was backed decisively by Egypt — this, despite the fact that Egypt was exempted from suspending "normalization" because of its treaty obligations with Israel.

Egypt also served as the pivot of the effort to strangle the fourth annual ME and North Africa Economic Conference, which met on 16–18 November in Doha, Qatar. This forum, established to create the economic foundations of a "new ME," had waned with the peace process. Syria took the formal lead in calling for a boycott, and Saudi Arabia joined it, mostly out of pique toward Qatar. But it was Egypt's boycott that resounded. The US pulled out all stops to secure Arab participation, including personal interventions by Secretary Albright. The organizers pointed to success: 2,000 participants, including 850 businessmen from 65 countries. But only six Arab states sent official delegations to Qatar: Oman, Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, Tunisia and Mauritania.

THE ABNORMALIZATION OF ISRAEL

The stalemate in the peace process was accompanied by ever more blatant expressions of rejection of Israel on the popular level. Sometimes this took a sophisticated form, as in the work of the celebrated Syrian-born poet, Nizar Qabbani. On 15 April, Qabbani, who resided in London, wrote a long poem entitled "I Am with Terrorism."

This controversial poem was an angry and nostalgic paean to rejection of Israel — and not only the Israel of Netanyahu.

> I am with terrorism
> if it is able to save me
> from the immigrants from Russia
> Romania, Hungary, and Poland
>
> They settled in Palestine
> set foot on our shoulders
> to steal the minarets of al-Quds
> and the door of al-Aqsa
> to steal the arabesques
> and the domes.
>
> I am with terrorism
> if it will free the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth,
> and the Virgin Mary
> and the holy city
> from the ambassadors of death and desolation
>
> Yesteryear
> The nationalist street was fervent
> like a wild horse.
> The rivers were abundant with the spirit of youth.
>
> But after Olso,
> we no longer had teeth:
> we are now a blind and lost people.[18]

At other times, this same sentiment took a much cruder form, as in Jordan over the summer, with the appearance of stickers on windows of some stores: "No dogs, no Jews." (Two shopkeepers were arrested.)[19]

Could Arab governments deliver a people-to-people reconciliation, even if they wished to do so? Profound doubts remained among both Arabs and Israelis. The Lebanese-American commentator, Fouad Ajami, put it bluntly:

> There has been no discernible change in the Arab attitudes toward Israel and little preparation in the Arab world for the accommodation the peace promised. The great refusal persists. A foul wind attends this peace in Arab lands. It blows in that "Arab street" of ordinary men and women, among the intellectuals and the writers, and in the professional syndicates....This is the one great Arab fidelity that endures in a political culture that has been subjected to historic ruptures of every kind.[20]

Netanyahu pointed to this same Arab refusal:

> The fate of relations between Arab and Jew will be determined in the schools and the universities and the editorial boards of the newspapers, and in the mosques of the ME....And to date, almost 20 years after the first Arab-Israeli peace treaty, there is still no acceptance of Israel in these crucibles of Arab

> education: no map with the name of Israel; no textbook referring to Israel as a legitimate state exists today; no child is taught that Israel is a permanent neighbor; no newspaper avoids the most venomous incitement against Israel and Jews; no religious leader in the Arab world preaches tolerance for the Jewish state — certainly not openly and not forcefully...true peace comes from the heart, or more precisely, it comes from a change of heart. And there can be no such change unless the educators and intellectuals and spiritual leaders of the Arab world join in calling for the acceptance of Israel.[21]

In the absence of such acceptance, many Israelis across the political spectrum wondered, silently or aloud, whether a peace process between governments, even if successful, would ever produce a reconciliation.

One exception broke this rather bleak landscape. On 30 January, a group of Egyptian and Israeli intellectuals published what became known as the "Copenhagen declaration." This was the culmination of contacts established in 1995, predicated on the willingness of several left-leaning Egyptian intellectuals to defy the social ban on "normalization," in order to explore the contours of peace. "Peace is too important to be left only to governments," said the declaration. "As long as the popular base remains weak, the peace process may falter." The signatories endorsed the major UN resolutions (242, 338 and 425), the principle of land-for-peace, an end to new settlements, and made allusion to a Palestinian state.

In the past, intellectuals who defied the "normalization" ban were pilloried by their professional associations, and made into outcasts. The Arab signatories of the Copenhagen declaration were also attacked in the Arabic press. But this time, the Egyptian figures, led by the former Marxist theoretician and activist Lutfi al-Khuli, had impeccable national-left credentials and the tacit support of the Mubarak government. As the few channels of Israeli-Arab nongovernmental dialogue shut down, Egypt assured that it maintained — and controlled — the one viable channel.

REGIONAL REALIGNMENTS

The ME, famous for its shifting alliances, witnessed continued and gradual shifting in 1997. The enhancement of Israeli-Turkish relations represented perhaps the most important of these shifts over the past few years. Remarkably, the premiership of Erbakan did nothing to impede the continued expansion of these ties, and may even have provided an incentive to the Turkish military to strengthen them. Among the highlights in 1997: in February, Turkish Chief of Staff İsmail Hakkı Karadayı visited Israel (a first); in April, Israeli Foreign Minister Levy visited Turkey, and even met with (a less than enthusiastic) Erbakan; and in December, Israeli Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak visited Turkey (also a first).

Syria was much distressed by this growing relationship between its two most powerful neighbors. "This alliance," said Syrian Vice President 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, "is more dangerous to the security and stability of the region than the Baghdad Pact."[22] Syria maintained close ties to Iran as a counter, and Asad visited Tehran in July to further strengthen ties (he had visited the Islamic republic only once before, in 1990). But Syria felt sufficiently threatened in 1997 to put out feelers to an old nemesis, Iraq. In May, a Syrian business delegation visited Baghdad; in June, Syria

reopened its border with Iraq, which had been closed since 1980; and that same month, an Iraqi business delegation visited Damascus. Syria, in deference to Arab Gulf states, gave reassurances that diplomatic relations would not be restored. But there were numerous reports of business deals. Later in the year, Iraq closed a clandestine radio station which had broadcast against the Syrian regime, and Syria did the same to its anti-Saddam station. Both stations had broadcast for nearly 20 years. All this was far from a reconciliation, and even further from a realignment. But it did indicate that the Israeli-Turkish relationship, whatever its precise nature, was bound to have repercussions within the Arab system.

Another noteworthy shift occurred in the Gulf. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and Iran practiced mutual delegitimation. They accused each other of deviation from Islam, and bloody clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi police nearly became part of the annual Hajj ritual itself. But for some years, Saudi-Iranian relations had been on a steady mend. Saudi Arabia was eager to appease a stronger Iran, and to keep Iran from drawing closer to Iraq. Iran wished to draw Saudi Arabia as much as possible out of the American orbit. Their reconciliation would be based upon a kind of shared primacy: as an Iranian newspaper put it during the year, "Iran and Saudi Arabia are in reality the two pillars of the Muslim world."[23] Both sides finally buried the scimitar at the triennial summit conference of the Islamic Conference Organization, which met in Tehran in December. The presence at the Tehran summit of Saudi Crown Prince 'Abdallah (greeted by Iran's president, Khatami, with kisses on both cheeks) crowned years of healing diplomacy. Similar diplomacy brought Kuwait's ruling emir, Shaykh Jabir al-Ahmad Al Sabah to Tehran. Their attendance at the summit continued a time-honored practice in the Gulf, of the weak conciliating the strong.

In the ME, no enmity was ever forgotten, but no enmity could withstand the slow shifting of alignments.

POWER DRAIN

For the US, Europe, and Russia, the ME remained a zone of uncertainty. They had come together briefly in the early 1990s, at a moment when American leadership stood above question. In 1997, American leadership in Arab-Israeli peacemaking was still generally respected by other powers. The US had become the sole broker and final arbiter for every last detail of every agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. The Oslo process, begun in Europe, had become a Washington process. But Europe and Russia did push for a greater role where their interests were directly at stake. This was certainly the case regarding the Iranian side of "dual containment." And Europe had no intention of following American admonitions on the need for Turkey's integration into the EU.

DUAL FRUSTRATION

In March, Secretary of State Albright summarized a recent review of US policy, undertaken after the American plan to topple the Iraqi regime from northern Iraq had unraveled in 1996 (see *MECS* 1996, pp. 28–29, 343–44). The statement made the obvious even more explicit: the US had nothing against the Iraqi people, and it would be ready "to enter rapidly into dialogue with the successor regime to Saddam," with the purpose of assuring that Iraq remain "independent, unified and free from undue

external influence, for example, from Iran."[24] What it did not do was spell out a plan for removing Saddam from power. So the UN-imposed sanctions remained the crutch of a hobbling policy through 1997.

Saddam himself remained unrepentant; the last report of Rolf Ekeus, outgoing head of the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), complained of Iraq's "policy of systematic concealment, denial and masking of the most important aspects of its proscribed weapons and related capabilities."[25] Ekeus was replaced on 1 July by Australian Richard Butler, whose own reports conveyed the same message. In late October, a crisis developed when Iraq threatened to expel American members of UNSCOM inspection teams, and to shoot down UN-commissioned U-2 surveillance planes. In mid-November, the Iraqi Government backed down. As the US secretary of defense, William Cohen, put it: "This is a long-term project. This is not something that's going to be over in a very short period of time."[26] The question was whether Europe and Russia, and with them the UN Security Council, would stay the course. By 1997, there were already clear signs they would not, but the dissent would not become manifest until 1998.

When it came to Iran, everything hinged on interpretation. The US claimed that Iran still sponsored terrorism, sought to develop weapons of mass destruction, posed a threat to its neighbors, and therefore had to be subjected to sanctions. Europeans and Russians countered that Iran had turned a corner, and that engagement of Iran in a "critical dialogue" was a more effective approach than sanctions. When the American interpretation failed to persuade, the US tried to use old-fashioned leverage to compel Europe and Russia to respect Washington-mandated sanctions. Not surprisingly, they resented and resisted the pressure.

For a moment, it seemed as though the Iran debate would be resolved in favor of the Americans. In April, a German court implicated Iran's leaders in the killing of four Iranian dissidents in a Berlin restaurant in 1992 (the so-called Mykonos affair). The presiding judge concluded that Iran's "political leadership" had ordered the assassinations. Germany immediately recalled its ambassador from Tehran; the EU presidency promptly called on member states to do the same, and suspended the EU's "critical dialogue" with Iran.

But the EU had too much invested in Iran to stay the course. EU exports to Iran exceeded $11bn.; imports, largely oil, came to over $17bn. In April, EU foreign ministers quietly decided to send their ambassadors back to Tehran — only to have Iran refuse to take back the German and Danish envoys. The EU insisted that all return at once, and a stalemate ensued. But the atmosphere improved after Khatami's election in May, and in November a compromise allowed the ambassadors to return. In the meantime, on 28 September, the French oil company Total signed a natural gas agreement to develop Iran's South Pars field, along with the Russian state oil company and a Malaysian company. The three companies would be investing $2bn., in disregard of the threat of legally mandated US sanctions against foreign companies doing Iranian business.

Not only was US policy toward Iran under European assault; it came under more vocal criticism at home. An article in the influential *Foreign Affairs* by former US national security advisers Zbigniew Brzezinski (a Democrat) and Brent Scowcroft (a Republican) argued against the continuation of US sanctions against Iran. "The policy of unilateral US sanctions against Iran has been ineffective," they declared,

"and the attempt to coerce others into following America's lead has been a mistake." Containment merely isolated Iran and drove it into a Russian embrace.[27] This was also the view of most of the large oil and oil service companies in the US, which had lost billions in potential sales. Khatami's election only intensified such criticism, which seemed broadly diffused in the business and academic communities.

But the Administration held firm, adopting a wait-and-see approach. "I think everyone has been intrigued by the election of Mr. Khatami," said Secretary Albright, "but actions speak louder than words."[28] In the meantime, there loomed the distinct possibility that Iran might be implicated directly in the June 1996 bombings in Khubar, Saudi Arabia, in which 19 Americans died (see *MECS* 1996, pp. 582–85). Suspicion continued to focus upon Saudi Shi'i radicals trained in Iran. But the Saudis, to judge from American complaints, proved singularly uncooperative with the US investigation of the bombings. "I don't have enough information to make strong findings or conclusions," announced the FBI director after his third visit to Saudi Arabia in connection with the investigation. "There is a great deal of information that we have not seen."[29] The reason for the Saudi lack of cooperation was unclear. Was it national pride? A desire to cover up domestic dissent? Or a wish to avoid embroilment in an Iranian-American confrontation? Whatever the rationale, the lack of full Saudi cooperation left a cloud of mystery over the Khubar bombing.

EUROPE: NO (MORE) TURKS ALLOWED

Europe accused the US of pushing Iran into a dangerous corner; the US accused Europe of doing the same to Turkey, over the matter of EU membership.

Turkey did not expect near-term accession, and understood that it fell short of the EU's political and economic criteria for membership. But it did hope to see Europe keep the door open to future membership, and place Turkey on par with some of the other applicants, such as Bulgaria. The projected inclusion of Cyprus especially galled Turkey. In its frustration, Turkey issued a series of threats over the year: it would "integrate" northern Cyprus with the mainland; it would block the eastward expansion of NATO (in which Turkey was a full member).

But "fortress Europe" had no intention of opening further. It was already under the strains created by millions of immigrants from the ME and North Africa, who posed economic problems when economies slowed at home, and who undermined domestic security when conflicts worsened abroad. The stiffest opposition to Turkish accession came from Germany — already home to 2m. Turkish immigrants — and Greece. At the EU summit in Luxembourg on 12–13 December, the EU did not include Turkey either in the immediate "accession talks" track (membership in about five years) or the "reinforced preaccession" track (economic aid and mentoring). Despite efforts by EU officials to put a conciliatory spin on the rejection, Turkey felt spurned. The US remained concerned that European policy would push Turkey in wrong directions, tilting the Turkish electorate toward Islamism, and the Turkish economy toward Russia and Iran.

RUSSIAN SALESMEN

The Russian challenge came principally in three arenas where the US had difficulty formulating solutions: Cyprus, Iraq and Iran. In every instance, that challenge was almost inadvertent, the result of the Russian pursuit of profitable deals.

In January, Cyprus signed a cash-and-carry agreement with a state-owned Russian company for S-300 ground-to-air missiles with a range of 150 km. — far enough to reach mainland Turkey. Delivery was scheduled for mid-1998. Assorted Turkish politicians hinted darkly that if such missiles were deployed, Turkey would launch a preemptive strike to destroy them. The heightened tension contributed to the June decision by President Clinton to name a presidential emissary to Cyprus. In March, Russia signed a production sharing agreement with Iraq to develop a large oil field (West Qurna), requiring a Russian investment of $200m. and another $100m. loan to Iraq. Russia also pushed publicly for the lifting of UN sanctions, for obvious reasons: sanctions-bound Iraq still owed cash-strapped Russia $7bn. And during the year, work proceeded on a Russian nuclear reactor at Bushehr in southern Iran, the outcome of a 1995 accord. US Vice President Al Gore took up the reactor (and Russian assistance to Iranian missile projects) on a September visit to Moscow. The Russians promised various safeguards against proliferation; whether they would actually work, no one could say. So long as Russia remained desperate for markets and contracts, it was bound to involve itself in deals avoided by everyone else because they defied US policies.

An Arab journalist summed up the relative position of the powers in the ME at the end of 1997:

> Washington is still the number one capital in the calculations of most of the region's rulers, and they still pin their "hopes" on its sponsorship, given that Europe is in a state of introversion and Russia only shows up occasionally....If the US is suffering from anything, it is diminishing profitability, not a bottom-line loss. It can clearly live with that situation and suffice with crisis-managing the [Israeli-Palestinian] negotiations on the one hand and plugging the holes in "dual containment" on the other.[30]

In 1998, the US would face the test of how many Israeli-Palestinian crises it could manage and how many Persian Gulf holes it could plug at one time.

NOTES

For the place and frequency of publications cited here, and for the full name of the publication, news agency, radio station or monitoring service where an abbreviation is used, please see "List of Sources." Only in the case of more than one publication bearing the same name is the place of publication noted here.

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