THE MIDDLE EAST
TIMING AND PROCESS

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Probably the most important question in the Middle East "peace process" today is how appropriate the present moment is for taking the long-awaited next step. Although that question is not always specifically addressed, it is always a factor underlying discussions on wide-ranging issues and overarching debates on smaller topics. A simple, direct answer is not clear, however, because the question is multifaceted. Do present conditions favor progress? However propitious, can they be more fully developed, or do they, nonetheless, promise more success now than they might in the foreseeable future? Furthermore, is the present moment equally ripe for all parties, or, if not, for whom is it most favorable?

Much as one might have liked the end of 1985 to be that especially appropriate time for peace talks, it probably was not so. However, the current stalemate does offer some ready opportunities that the United States can grasp to facilitate progress toward peace. Regardless of how the present compares with some ideal standard, conditions are certainly more promising now than they are likely to be in the foreseeable future, which makes it urgent that the United States move before it is too late. Since most of the foreign-policy business involves managing ambiguous situations rather than bringing about clear-cut resolutions, and since foreign-policy failures are easier to identify and attract more attention than foreign-policy successes, the toughest job of any foreign-policy adviser is to convince the executive of the urgency of a problem and of the ripeness of the present moment for handling it. That is why it is so important to understand the relative as well as absolute—probable future as well as present—values of urgency.

ELEMENTS OF TIMING

"Ripe moment" is a broadly recognized concept, but it is rarely given formal consideration. Skilled practitioners of diplomacy rely instead on their own sense of timing, developed through years of on-the-job training and observation of skilled mentors. Timing tactics may be influenced by the unpredictable or the personal element, but other forces are identifiable, at least as concepts. Three seem crucial.

Regardless of how the present compares with some ideal, conditions are more promising now than they are likely to be in the foreseeable future.
FPI POLICY BRIEFS

Probably the most important circumstance is the "hurting stalemate," a situation in which both parties find themselves locked out of which they cannot extricate themselves by normal, conceivable means of escalation. A hurting stalemate is not just an impasse; it is a deadlock that is unalterable for both sides. Furthermore, it is a painful impasse that is unstable and, therefore, it is impossible for the parties to become accustomed to or endure it in the expectation that it will go away.

The appropriate ending to a hurting stalemate is a "looming catastrophe," an impending turn for the worse, which would hurt both sides even more and which often results from a desperate but foreseeable attempt by one party to escalate its way out of the problem. The textbook example is the mutual encirclement of the Israeli and Egyptian armies in October 1973. A more extended—and therefore more relevant—case was the deepening deadlock in the negotiations of 1977 before Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. Although no definite deadline for rectifying the situation was stated, as is often the case, it was clearly felt that the deadlock would have to be broken before the year ended, or the process would be lost and worse alternatives would dominate.*

A turn for the worse often results from a desperate but foreseeable attempt by one party to escalate its way out of the problem. The second influence on timing is the possibility of a "way out." This should be thought of as the perception of potential, not as a specific proposal that the parties must accept. The potential proceeds from a subjective perception that the other party is willing to provide an acceptable outcome and from a more objective sense that a compromise is possible, given the positions of the two sides. One must not ask for too much, however; it is not likely that the parties' positions will actually overlap. It is also unnecessary to have a third party proposal on which the opponents can focus. All that is necessary is that the two sides be within reach of an understanding, that neither insists on major exclusions, and that both be flexible.

The gap between the two positions will be partially bridged when both sides perceive that the other is willing to enter into a joint solution that does not crush the opponent. Since the interests of the state prevail in diplomacy, parties should consider each willingness with skepticism, but they should not deny its existence. Both the objective and subjective perceptions were present after the October war; four years later Sadat may have misperceived the degree of willingness on Menachem Begin's part, but the perceptions were there nonetheless, right or wrong.

The third component of timing is the existence of valid spokesmen for each side. Even when dealing with two sovereign states, the official representatives may be hampered from participating in the give and take that diplomats require, because of a hostile or divided domestic setting. In such a case—one that is present to some extent in almost any governmental scenario—it becomes necessary for the opponent to enter the other party's domestic politics.† This does not mean subversion (physical entry into political interaction), but it does

and justifies its ostracism by other countries. It challenges Jordan's own identity and, of course, the identity of the Palestinians even more. Yet Jordan faces other such challenges, some of them more immediate and less philosophical—notably, Syria's challenge for political dominance in the region. After Lebanon, Jordan is the immediate target of Syria's ambitions, above all because it is militarily there. A close neighbor with a distinctively different policy and on the Palestinian state makes a denial of Syria's leadership pretensions, and so Jordan must weigh potential repercussions—pain imposed by the Palestinian situation against pain imposed by Syria. The tacit alliance between Syria and Jordan's other Arab neighbor, Saudi Arabia, makes the choice even less difficult.

Regardless of its apparent stability the current stalemate contains some very destabilizing elements. The most dangerous is the continuing rise of religious extremism, both Shia and Sunni, which could turn against any of the Middle East governments, including Syria. The case of Lebanon, while composed of some peculiarly Lebanese features, is nonetheless eloquent. A patently, if unfortunately, stable situation emerged from its partition into Syrian and Israeli zones after 1982. Many factors contributed to the collapse of this situation, but the most important was its rejection by Islamic groups. Furthermore, the airline hostages incident in early 1985, while brought under control through Syrian good offices, showed the destabilizing power of the religious factions. Although it is very unlikely that other Iranian revolutions will develop in the area, disruptions by Islamic groups—for example, the incidents in Hamza and Beirut and Sadat's assassination—have proven capable of upsetting any peace process and, even worse, of seriously dislocating friendly Arab governments or of diverting their attention from important domestic or foreign policies.

Syria itself is a second potentially destabilizing force. The ambitions of the Syrian government—to the extent that they can be divided through a peculiarly opaque Syrian style—are less threatening to general stability, or to the peace process specifically, than is the real possibility that the means to those ambitions might get out of hand. Most dangerous is the constant nurturing and growth of the Syrian army, which at some point may turn to eat the presidential hand that feeds it. Even if Hafiz al-Assad is able to keep the army under control, there is little likelihood that his successor will be able to do so. Interstate conflict, military revenge on the government after a defeat by Israel or by Lebanese anarchy, overzealousness for a war with Israel, or a shift in regional tactics from subtle interference to direct conquest may all figure in future Syrian policies. In short, any present attempt to revive a peace process will face inevitable difficulties, but hesitancy now will make any future attempt at policy even more difficult.

The third element of future destabilization is the one most frequently overlooked—U.S. policy. It is undoubtedly difficult, costly, demanding, and troublesome for the United States to encourage change in the Middle East of today, where conditions are not always appropriate. Yet it is certain to be very much so in the impending future. Not only is the peace process likely to be more difficult to move later; it is equally likely that Middle East events themselves will predominate, imposing problems and conflicts on the United States that Washington would rather not have to face. The airline hostages incidents, the Israeli raid on Tunisia in October, and the Achille Lauro affair in November are only the more recent examples. A hotter situation means a closer Soviet involvement, and Moscow, having come to life again under Mikhail Gorbachev, is in a position to face situations that it can turn to its advantage. This inclination to increase, not decrease, it would be foolhardy to assume that improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations will mean that windows of opportunity and invitations from exposed Soviet allies will be rejected if they seem to promise new Soviet advances. A close neighbor with a distinctively different policy and on the Palestinian state makes a denial of Syria's leadership pretensions, and so Jordan must weigh potential repercussions—pain imposed by the Palestinian situation against pain imposed by Syria. The tacit alliance between Syria and Jordan's other Arab neighbor, Saudi Arabia, makes the choice even less difficult.

All these elements of instability serve as time limits bearing down on the current stalemate. The most specific deadline for action, although its specificity is misleading, is the October date for the transfer of power from Shimon Peres to Itzak Shamir. However, to wait until the deadline is imminent would be, in effect, to wait until it is past. Furthermore, the deadline could be advanced at any moment by a government decision to call early elections. Should the government do this, it would be in only a stronger position if it could boast to the voters of some progress or potential progress toward peace. Thus, the situation is not only more promising now than it will be in the future, but it also includes a deadline that may lead to potentially decisive gain or loss.

SOLUTION THROUGH PROCESS

In truth, the way out is no more evident at the present than is a clear and immediate hurting stalemate. Not only is the distance between the two (or more) sides significant, but the positions of the sides are themselves unclear. It is not likely that Israel would talk with even a PLO that recognized UN Resolution 242, which is in part why it is not clear how the PLO is to doing so. It is not apparent how valuable Soviet participation would be in a general international conference on the Middle East, but it is also unclear how much Soviet participation is demanded in the Jordanian or even the Syrian positions. Perhaps this many-layered ambiguity is merely the symptom of a deeper uncertainty about the possibility of any agreement on the issue of the West Bank. Unlike the situation in the Sinai or on the Golan Heights that existed in previous negotiations with Egypt and Syria, there are not yet any acceptable starting points, temporary resting places, or final outcomes that could conceivably satisfy both sides.

It is primarily the last point that obstructs progress: there are no starting or intermediate points, because the conflict over the final outcome is absolute. Even the West Bank without Jerusalem is fundamentally unacceptable to the Arabs, and such partial, nonterritorial solutions as internal autonomy are equally so as a final solution. The point is worth emphasis: Israeli could relinquish part or all of Sinai and even the Golan Heights, since these areas have only military significance. Such territory could be used to buy peace, a condition that—if credible—would make buffers unnecessary. The West Bank, however, has intrinsic value to both sides, and enough of the territory—greater Jerusalem and the Jordan River (as a defense line)—is sufficiently valuable, even to Peres,
to make a compromise difficult. A compromise on Sinai or Golan could buy stability, but a compromise on the West Bank would itself be unstable. But even more unstable—and a more likely short-run outcome—is drift and frustration.

Nevertheless, the conflict is not necessarily insoluble. The parties, however, must be brought to communicate their willingness to invent a mutually satisfactory framework that will meet the other party’s interests halfway. In addition, current discussions should focus on establishing a process that is definite enough to develop its own momentum but ambiguous enough to convince both parties that it will lead to the outcome they desire, until it is too late for them to discover otherwise. The first requisite to progress—mutual empathy or public commitment to a bilateral process—is at best not very well established. Negotiations, by nature, always shade such feelings with some doubt, but in the Middle East of the present the doubt is overwhelming. Both sides profess commitment to a peace process in order to shift any blame for failure onto the other party. Furthermore, neither side will accept liability for a process with momentum is neither side’s preferred strategy; both sides feel the other will not offer a square deal. Thus, concessions are unlikely, because each side believes that these will not be reciprocated. Each side believes that any concessions, or even commitment to an open process, will offer no middle ground for bargaining but instead will lead to the unacceptable position of the other side. This conviction is extremely important, and it shows why diplomats have a need to understand the general shape of potential outcomes before engaging in an open-ended process.

The plans currently on the table (both of which have a curious though greatly unrecognized resemblance to American proposals) suggest two potential outcomes. The first plan is for an Arab West Bank under Jordanian sovereignty, in which the Palestinian entity would be joined to the East Bank in a yet-to-be-defined federal or confederal relationship. This is the Hussein-Arafat agreement of February 11, 1982 (and the United Arab Kingdom proposal of March 15, 1972). The other plan is for an autonomous West Bank at least temporarily under Israeli sovereignty, in which local Palestinians would join in discussions under Jordanian and Israeli (and other) auspices to determine their future status. This is the Peres plan of June 10, but it is also similar to the Camp David framework of September 17, 1978. There is, therefore, a competition between two outcomes in the current process, which for its movement is headed in two opposite directions. Moreover, it is doing so with an American blessing. Although the two plans address a solution to the Palestinian problem—the Israeli plan being less specific on the question of final status and the Arab plan less specific on a method for ending the war—it is unlikely that the two will be grafted together, since their outcomes would be fundamentally different.

On the way to the outcome there are two different components to the process of finding peace—the format or procedure for negotiation and the political or substantive shaping of the path. Here, too, two formats are currently vying against each other in the Middle East—one that would pursue bilateral talks and another, an international conference. The two can be combined in theory but only with difficulty in practice. At the same time, a third format involving proximity talks is being conducted, unsatisfactorily. In earlier times the substance of the peace process was firmly taken in hand and defined—by Henry Kissinger in 1975-76, Anwar Sadat in 1977, and Jimmy Carter in 1978. The glitter surrounding the leader in each of these cases has obscured the importance of the process he established. Indeed, each man stood out because he cut the knot by forcing a move with procedural and substantive implications. No one has had the guts to do so this time, and discussion of the problem has bogged down in mutually exclusive defenses of competing processes. Rather than focusing on the substantive lesson of past statemanship, attention has focused on a call for the procedural event.

Yet in fact, that makes the moment ripe. There is now a discussion of process, even if it has become frozen in fixed defensive positions. There is a stalemate on the substantive and procedural issue of process and, therefore, an opportunity to break it. By breaking it, by finding a workable process, one of the parties can change the agenda and force the others to consider particular issues (as long as you give them a chance to get involved). The challenge is to find a process. This is, in fact, the same challenge that faced the parties before Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem, and a forcing or signaling move similar to that of 1977 would doubtless have a similar effect today. However, history rarely repeats itself, and when it does, the repetition makes the conditions necessary for success more difficult to obtain. (Kissinger discovered this as he tried to negotiate a number of parallel disengagement agreements in 1974-75 and succeeded with only mounting costs.) A trip to Jerusalem is a real possibility only for King Hussein, but, having been done before, it has probably lost its galvanizing quality. A trip to Amman would be a real coup for Peres. However, it is not necessary that the process be defined in exactly the same way as in 1977 or 1978—by a personal trip of recognition. Other methods are possible, including scheduling a meeting or even proposing process alternatives that remove the current defensiveness. King Hussein and Yasir Arafat in February 1985, and Shimon Peres in June, made such attempts, but neither effort was very galvanizing.

It must also be remembered that process does not now mean “final peace negotiations.” That would be—in Harold Saunders’s eloquent image—trying to drive in four guns when all that is needed is the first one. Even though the time is obviously relevant to the eventual form of negotiations, it is the beginning of the process of exchanging and sounding out views that is now under consideration. The current confrontation over strict bilateralism versus a multilateral conference disputes alternatives that are the end of a process only beginning to begin. The formula that is most flexible and best directed is that of autonomy talks, similar to those outlined in the Camp David agreements (with appropriate modifications). Egypt is no longer the Arab representative, and “Camp David” is no longer an attractive label. Unfortunately, “autonomy” too, has been worn out by the Israeli-Egyptian-American talks of 1980 (although transitions were retained in the Arab Peace Declaration of 1982), and so new ideas on process are required. The time is right for such new ideas, and leaders could make a strong impact by providing them.

THE NEED FOR SPOKESMEN

The need for valid spokesmen is also met mainly by ambiguity. It is not clear who speaks for Israel; it is not clear who speaks for which Arabs, and among them, which Palestinians. Therefore, the nominal representatives are usually busier consolidating or protecting their home bases than they are advancing toward the other side. When they do take progressive steps they may well be aiming at the wrong representative of the other party. Finally, to complicate the situation further, reaching out to a putative spokesman may be the best way to delegitimize him. Indeed, the war over spokesmen is a way of waging the war over process. The PLO is maneuvering for recognition, a recognition that Israel promises will block the peace process. Israel is maneuvering for a process that will exclude the PLO, since only Jordan and West Bank Pales-
tinians are invited to the negotiations in the Israeli plan. Yet, just as positions and processes are needed, so are representatives.

Nevertheless, this uncertainty does provide an opportunity for improving the situation, and it may prove more propitious than an ostensibly favorable situa-
tion. The struggle for spokesmen is now being used negatively—to block pro-
cess; it can also be used positively—to define and initiate process. If, as they consider possible Israeli spokesmen, Arab leaders decided which one would be a preferred negotiating partner and then took steps to strengthen that can-
didate over competitors, the process would be moved ahead. The position of the less favored could be weakened by making offers that would be viewed as attractive by a large constituency but unacceptable to only a narrow oppo-
sition. Specifically, an offer that would strengthen Shimon Peres and undercut or divide the Likud party would take positive advantage of the present situa-
tion. Similarly, as Israeli leaders review the list of potential Arab or Pales-
tinian spokesmen, they would do well to strengthen one or more of the can-
didates in the same manner and in the Arab’s own terms. Specifically, if Israel
is really interested in strengthening the position of Palestinian spokesmen from the West Bank, it can adopt measures to deal officially with moderate Palesti-
nian mayors, instead of contributing to a vacuum in the very area where it hopes to find leadership.

Finding a legitimate representative, unfortunately, is not something that can be considered and decided before other elements of prenegotiation are deter-
mined. It is part of the whole activity of finding positions, establishing pro-
cess, and working in and out of stalemate. Yet it is a particularly important aspect of the politics and diplomacy of the Middle East—one where present condi-
tions provide an opportunity for definitive and constructive moves.

INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES

Even if something can be done to advance the peace process, is it worth the effort? Present conditions are not fully ripe, just riper than what they will eventually become and ripe enough to be used to favor progress. Opportunities exist for diplomacy and direction setting, but if they are not seized, an uneasily worse situation will develop. Yet, in fact, that is as close a description of a moment of ripeness as one is likely to obtain anywhere. The question then

becomes, is it more costly to seize the moment or to let it go? More specifically, is uncomfortable uncertainty, such as at present, to be compared with a possibly worse situation of the future if nothing is done or to the certain need for effort and the real possibility of costly failure if a new process is launched? In truth, foreign-policymaking is greatly a matter of managing inertia, because real ini-
tiatives and demands are costly and uncertain.

Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger has argued that “if the United States is not to demoralize its allies [Israel] and undermine irretrievably the position of its Arab friends [Egypt, Jordan], it must clearly define its objectives before it commits itself. Even then, the price of success will be tension with Israel, confrontation with Syria and unfeasibility in Jordan.” 6 Others have further con-
tended that any initiative would weaken the position of America’s closest friend in Israel, Prime Minister Shimon Peres, that the pressure of the moment is as exaggerated as the danger of the future, and that any initiative would jeopardize the best outcome of all—gradual Israeli absorption of the West Bank. If, as some claim, it is “five minutes after midnight” on the West Bank—that is, if Jerusalem’s urban sprawl has created an irreversible integration of the West Bank into Israel—why not sit back and enjoy it?

Significantly, most arguments against movement now proceed from the im-
plcit assumption of a single scenario: Israeli consolidation of its occupation of the West Bank. Given this assumption, they are absolutely sound: if the goal is to annex “Judea and Samaria,” any further movement on the peace process (beyond the treaty neutralizing Egypt) is unwanted. It is not the in-
tent of this essay to examine the basic weakness and contradiction of that assumption. Suffice it to say that annexation of the West Bank would make it impossible for Israel to maintain its basic Jewish and democratic nature. Even Likud leaders have recognized the impossibility, within the current in-
ternational context, of legitimizing the present uncertainty through formal an-
nexation. An outcome that is neither desirable nor attainable is scarcely ser-
viceable as a policy assumption.

Why not, then, just manage inertia? At the present time is it in the American interest to try to move the peace process, and does that interest outweigh the dangers of going out on a limb? The answer has already been partially stated. The situation is not merely a troublesome uncertainty; it is certain instability, awaiting certain and worse eventualities. It is threatened not merely by the change of a destabilizing accident, escalation, or attempted consolidation but also by the constant presence of anomic groups incapable of taking over but eager to disrupt. It is threatened by a Syrian government and will be eventu-
ally by a Syrian army pressing for stronger moves against both Arab states and Israel. It is threatened by a Soviet Union again ready to seize any oppor-
tunity for extended role and influence. All of these dangers are inherent in
the current instability, and they promise a future less advantageous to U.S.
interests and to the interests of U.S. associates and allies.

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Furthermore, problems within the Middle East conflict itself make it imperative to renew initiatives. Throughout its nearly forty-year history the Middle East conflict has grown only worse through inattention. Solutions that were within grasp at one point became only more unattainable or impossible to achieve later. The Palestinian issue is one such example: Twenty years ago, around the time of UNR 242, the Palestinians could be referred to as “refugees,” without having to take a PLO into account. Today, whatever judgment one might make about these aspects of the problem, they are the stumbling blocks to solutions. Twenty, or even ten, years ago the West Bank was separate and divisible from Israel; as time passes it becomes increasingly difficult to effectuate the partition of Palestine necessary to the separation of Jewish and Arab states. Yet inhabitants are by no means any closer to accepting a bina-

THE FIRST STEP

Unfortunately, no one wants to step forward and take the necessary initiative. The reasons lie at several levels but are not difficult to understand. One, already mentioned, is that initiatives cost and half initiatives hurt allies, wound enemies, and injure the initiator. Kissinger’s analysis, already noted, identified the same problem. Yet it is better to do well even a job half done than to do nothing at all. A less well-identified but widespread problem is that of unreciprocated con-

If states are to promote their interests, this situation should be recognized and the vicious circle broken. This, however, does not mean that it is easy to do so. Yet it is possible for any party to make a dramatic and effective move that would influence the agenda to its own benefit. This was the basis of Sadat’s initiative: in one stroke he tore away the opposition’s excuse for not talking, by showing that he could talk. In a less than rational world the lessons of Sadat’s visit are ambiguous and debated, because of the same self-proving hypotheses that he sought to shatter. This, in itself, confirms that new initiatives are needed if the cycle of resistance is to be broken.

Who, then, should make the first move? As shown, each state has real reasons for not stepping forward and exposing itself. The Hussein-Arafat agreement of February 11 and the Peres plan of June 10 were openings, but they scarcely exposed any of the parties. The Arab statement remained coy on the touchy

matter of UNR 242, and the Israeli plan was still unyielding on the question of Palestinian representation. An Israeli representative at a recent Council on Foreign Relations conference made an important distinction between states as “givers” and states as “variables” in Middle East diplomacy. He complained that Arab states are often assumed to be “givers” with particular problems that, he understood, make them act in certain ways; whereas, Israel is considered to be the “variable,” free to do “the right thing,” which it does not do for only perverse reasons. He called for an understanding of Israel as a given, too. The point is well taken but, again, only half true. All states are given and their reasons for action and inaction must be understood. Yet all states are potential variables—indeed some even more so than others—and they must be considered so if the stalemate is to be not only understood but also overcome.

It is worth defining the prerequisites to a renewed peace process in terms of each party’s “givers”—what each must express in its own statements and what assurances it must receive from the other party. Prime Minister Peres needs to show that the process chosen will not be used for the destruction of Israel, and he needs to be assured that Israel’s existence and security requirements are recognized as an ingredient of the solution of the Palestinian problem. Indications that he had been able to “extract” such recognition would strengthen his own position in Israeli politics. The moderate Arab coalition—King Hus-

*Prospects for Peace, 41.
FPI POLICY BRIEFS

The purpose of this essay is not to write a script for taking advantage of the somewhat auspicious moment. Rather, it is to outline those prerequisites to peace that must be met to make any eventual script successful. Since the present challenge is to reframe a process, some conditional statements might provide a good beginning. If a clear Palestinian statement recognizing UNRWA cannot be made at this time, a statement indicating the resolution's acceptable parts (for example, Israeli rights to part of the former Palestinian territory) and specifying the unacceptable parts (for example, reference to Palestinians as refugees only) would be less coy and more forthright. Similarly, a statement of the conditions under which mutual recognition could be exchanged would be a good way to give the process momentum. By the same token, on the Israeli side, conditional statements as well as discussions on the possible tradeoffs implied in the "peace for territory" formula applied to the West Bank could also initiate a process. The United States, as well, could publicly state its conditions for the type of visits and statements that it could support and also engage in (necessarily private) discussions of various "what if" scenarios.

The time is not only ripe for these kinds of exchanges; it is pressing. Unless a process—as opposed to tiring and unsupported assertions of "momentum"—is put back into motion now, there will no longer be any process to save.

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