

ical geography other than eliminate Iraq as a threat to its neighbours for the rest of the decade. Of the three principal American political objectives for the post-war period – economic redistribution from rich to poor in the Arab world, expansion of political participation, and a resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict – none are likely to be met.

In the matter of redistribution of wealth, Kuwait – the only country with substantial liquid assets – will be fully engaged in political and economic reconstruction. Saudi Arabia, which financed a large part of the war, had to go to the international money markets to raise its share. Iraq will be struggling for the rest of this decade to rebuild its infrastructure and economy. Nor can the oil-producing states anticipate a substantial increase in the price of oil to finance reconstruction. The Arab-Israel conflict, now more than forty years old, has bankrupted the economies of Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Syria, and the Palestinians, and the war in the Persian Gulf has now ruined the Iraqi economy and removed the oil-producing states as potential donors of aid. The prospects for redistribution of wealth between the rich and the poor, and the management of conflict that grows out of inequities of resource ownership, are hardly bright.

ALSO UNLIKELY IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE IS THE EXPANSION OF POLITICAL participation and democratization in the heartland of the Arab Middle East. Limited processes of political reform have begun only in Kuwait and progress is very slow. No such change is likely in Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf states, and Syria. The prospect of political change in Iraq is very remote.

Finally, the war has also made it more, not less, difficult to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It strengthened the existing governments of Syria and Israel, and badly weakened the leadership of the Palestinians. The president of Syria, Hafez-al-Asad, emerged from the war strengthened economically and politically, using the opportunity to consolidate formal control of Lebanon. Syria's troubled economy is also receiving substantial help from Saudi Arabia following Syrian participation in the coalition. Despite declining Soviet military assistance and diplomatic support, Syria today is as capable of shaping the agenda and the terms of Arab-Israeli negotiations as before the war.

In Israel, the war had contradictory consequences. Now that Iraq is no longer in a position to join a coalition against Israel, the only serious strategic threat comes from Syria. Syria is less likely to attack alone than in conjunction with other Arab forces, so a large-scale war involving ballistic missiles and attacks against cities is far less probable than it was a year ago. Israel is therefore relatively more secure.

On the other hand, for Israel the war was a difficult experience. Its civilian population was sent night after night into sealed rooms and forced to don gas masks, bringing back traumatic memories for many. From left to right across the political spectrum, there was a deep reaction against pictures of Palestinians chanting for Saddam Hussein to use chemical weapons against Israel.

The government of Yitzhak Shamir also came out of the war strengthened in Israeli public opinion. He was able to persuade Israelis, under extraordinarily trying circumstances, that restraint in response to missile attacks by Iraq against Tel Aviv was the wisest course of action. Given this surge of public support, it is going to be extraordinarily difficult to persuade the governing coalition of the urgency of concessions to the Palestinians once the bargaining begins.

Palestinians, for their part, face the prospect of a divided and weakened leadership. Yasir Arafat has been crippled in the Arab world by his open

and strong support of Saddam during the war. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and some of the smaller Gulf states were the principal source of funds for the PLO – a flow now cut off and not likely to be renewed as long as Saddam Hussein is in power in Iraq, and Arafat is Chairman. Iraq can no longer provide meaningful support; President Asad of Syria is a long-time personal foe of Arafat; and the leaderships of all the Gulf states are embittered by Arafat's position during the war.

In the Middle East, only Egypt offers lukewarm political endorsement of the PLO. Within the Arab world, Arafat's support is now restricted to North Africa, Yemen, and Libya. It is no coincidence that the government of Lebanon, supported by Syria, finally moved in July to expel PLO armed forces from the south, and to deprive the PLO of its only independent base of operations against Israel.

THE FINAL FACTOR AT WORK AGAINST PROGRESS IN THE PALESTINIAN-Israel conflict is the changed international context. For almost three decades, the Arab-Israel dispute was embedded in the larger Soviet-American contest. The US moved vigorously in the 1970s to manage the conflict in large part because it feared that the dispute could draw it into a dangerous confrontation with the Soviet Union. As that fear has abated with the changing politics of the USSR, so has the sense of urgency.

The peace process can move forward only if President Bush exploits his unprecedented influence at home and abroad. The President is in all probability a two-term president, relatively immune from domestic political pressures. He thus has the freedom to move forward aggressively, without worrying about the domestic political costs of doing so. The United States is also now in a unique position in the Middle East, with unprecedented influence and unchallenged by the Soviet Union – governments in the region have nowhere else to go. Damascus agreed to attend the regional peace conference promoted by the US largely because Syria had to turn to Washington. President Asad did not want everyone else in the Arab world but Syria to have an open line to Washington once the Soviet line was disconnected, even if temporarily.

IF AND WHEN THE PEACE CONFERENCE CONVENES, SOONER OR LATER THE US will have to force governments and leaders in the Middle East to make tough choices. Whether it will do so is an open question. There is no urgency attached to what will inevitably be a difficult and unpopular task. And even if the US tries vigorously and consistently to resolve the conflict, it will not be enough. Leaders in Israel, among the Palestinians, and among the Arab states must come to the conclusion that despite the painful choices they must make, they have more to lose if the status quo continues into the future. Here too, the prognosis is not bright.

The most tentative yet most revolutionary lesson of the war may lie in the way it ended. The intervention by the international community in the internal affairs of a member state, in response to the creation of massive numbers of Kurdish refugees, is without precedent – Iraq's sovereignty was clearly breached.

Although the intervention grew out of the war, and is therefore historically specific, the response of the international community nevertheless sends a strong message about the acceptable limits of the treatment of minorities in the Middle East. This may be a much more important bellwether of the kinds of international conflict – and solutions – likely to dominate the rest of this decade, than a war launched to defend the principle of state sovereignty and the legitimacy of state borders. □

