

**The  
Middle  
East  
Military  
Balance  
1997**

**Edited by**

**Mark A. Heller**

**and Yiftah Shapir**



# THE MIDDLE EAST MILITARY BALANCE, 1997

Mark A. Heller and **蔣世章** Shapir  
Edited by Mark A. Heller

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The Center for Strategic Studies was established at Tel Aviv University at the end of 1977. In 1983 it was renamed the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Mel Jaffee. The objective of the Center is to contribute to the expansion of knowledge on strategic subjects and to promote public understanding of and pluralistic thought on matters of national and international security.

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## Preface

As 1997 drew to a close, the Middle East lay under the shadow of the latest in a series of American-Iraqi crises that have periodically transfixed the region and the world since the end of the Gulf War in 1991. The proximate cause of this crisis was the attempt by the Iraqi government in the fall of 1997 to constrain the operations of United Nations Special Commission inspectors, and it was because of this context that the unfolding crisis intensified global awareness of the problem of weapons of mass destruction. Concern about the prospects and consequences of military escalation also provoked an unprecedented flurry of diplomatic activity, including involvement by Russia to a degree not seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Given the centrality and gravity of Gulf-related events in late 1997 and early 1998, it is natural that the survey of strategic developments in this year's *Middle East Military Balance* should devote two chapters to this part of the region. In one, Aharon Levran looks in considerable detail at Iraq's military capabilities and threat potential, and argues that while the threat is rather less pronounced than is widely assumed, continued vigilance is necessary to prevent events from moving in more troubling directions. In the second, Gerald L. Sorokin addresses doubts about the continuing ability of the U.S. dual containment policy to meet this challenge, and suggests that, for all the difficulties and uncertainties with which it must contend, some variant of dual containment will remain in effect until a more promising alternative presents itself.

Notwithstanding the drama associated with the Gulf crisis, other "routine" issues continued to preoccupy the region. One of these was the stalemate in the Israeli-Arab peace process, which is reviewed by Mark A. Heller. Another was the pervasive phenomenon of subnational conflict, in its Islamist and ethnic variants (particularly the Kurdish question), which is surveyed by Anat Kurz. In addition, Amos Gilboa provides an updated assessment of the main military forces in the region and looks at some of the developments, including the general qualitative improvements in regional orders-of-battle and the evolving Israeli-Turkish security relationship, that affect the strategic postures of Middle Eastern actors.

Once again, Yiftah Shapir has overall responsibility for the quantitative data on regional military forces and other documentation in parts II and III. This year much of this data is rearranged in what we hope is a more readable format.

As always, *The Military Balance* is a collaborative effort. I would like to thank all the contributors and my other colleagues at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, with a special word of appreciation for Avi Muallem, and to express my appreciation to those at Columbia University Press, especially Kate Wittenberg, Anne McCoy, and Alex Coolman, for helping to smooth a bumpy path.

M. A. H.

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**PART I**

**STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS**



# 1. The Arab-Israeli Peace Process

Mark A. Heller

1997 was a year of almost complete stagnation in the Arab-Israeli peace process. It began with an agreement on the long-delayed Israeli redeployment from Hebron and a brief flurry of hope that some momentum, at least on the Israeli-Palestinian track, might be revived. This optimism, however, was short-lived. The mutual undertakings to implement the Interim Agreement and move quickly to permanent status negotiations were not fulfilled. Instead, the dialogue quickly deteriorated into mutual accusations of breach of faith and exchanges of blame for the failure to move forward. The rest of the year witnessed much diplomatic motion – with intensifying American involvement – but very little movement, and it ended in acrimonious stalemate. On the Israeli-Syrian track, there was even less evidence of a viable process. Despite some halfhearted mediation efforts by third parties, neither side indicated any sense of urgency, and the contacts that had been broken off in March 1996 remained frozen. Israeli relations with Lebanon and Israeli policy in Lebanon were also essentially frozen, although growing domestic pressure for a unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon held the potential for some change. All in all, the peace process remained alive at the end of the year because of American artificial respiration and the reluctance of any of the parties to issue a political death certificate. But it would take more than these life-support systems to revive it from its comatose state.

## **The Israeli-Palestinian Track**

After several months of intense American mediation and occasional involvement by others, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) initialed a “Protocol Concerning the Redeployment in Hebron” on January 15, 1997. Because of its special character as the city of the biblical patriarchs, and particularly because it was the only West Bank city in which a Jewish community (of about 400) actually lived, Hebron had been accorded a status in the 1995 Interim Agreement rather different from that of the other six main Arab towns. Redeployment in Hebron was to be partial – about 15 percent of the city and almost 20,000 Palestinians were to remain under Israeli jurisdiction, at least until a permanent status agreement was reached – and to take place six months after the other cities had

been turned over to the Palestinian Authority (PA). But after the first suicide attacks in February 1996, Prime Minister Shimon Peres announced that the Hebron redeployment, scheduled for March 28, would be contingent on the effectiveness of the Palestinian Authority's campaign to suppress Hamas, and after the bus bombings in early March, he raised even more stringent conditions, including the arrest and transfer to Israel of all individuals suspected of involvement in these terrorist attacks and named on a list provided to the PA. The latter demand was not met, but even if it had been, it is unlikely, given the emotional climate of the election campaign by then in high gear, that Peres would have been able to carry out the redeployment. Thus Hebron became the most immediate of the Interim Agreement's "unfinished business" bequeathed to Benjamin Netanyahu by the Labor government.

Netanyahu had never made any secret of his distaste for the entire Oslo Agreement. Along with his supporters in the nationalist camp and settler movement, he had been particularly critical of the idea that Hebron should be lumped into the same category as the other cities of the West Bank. Thus he was not at all eager to press forward with the redeployment that Shimon Peres had managed to defer, and there was virtually no activity on the Palestinian track in the first few months of the new government's tenure. But after the spasm of violence in September following the opening of the Hasmonean Tunnel entrance near the Western Wall, American intervention and growing international and domestic criticism precluded the possibility of entirely avoiding redeployment. For the last few months of 1996, Netanyahu therefore focused on renegotiating the terms in the hope of achieving something that could at least be described to his own supporters and constituents as a more favorable arrangement than that agreed to by the previous government, and Yasir Arafat took advantage of the reopened negotiations to try and link the Hebron redeployment more tightly to other outstanding interim issues and to permanent status talks.

The result was the Hebron Agreement, which was actually a package of several elements: the Protocol, which dealt with the security and civil arrangements regarding redeployment and slight enlargement (to 20 percent) of the area of Hebron and the number of Palestinians (20,000+) to remain under Israeli control; an Agreed Minute, which detailed American plans for the reopening (paving, litter baskets, planters, etc.) of Shuhada Street that transverses the

Jewish quarter; and a "Note for the Record," prepared by American Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross, which dealt with the Israeli and Palestinian responsibilities concerning the outstanding "non-Hebron" issues and formally enshrined, at Netanyahu's insistence, the principle of reciprocity. According to the Note, Israel was obliged to carry out the first further redeployment (FRD) during the first week of March, to release Palestinian prisoners, and to resume negotiations on outstanding Interim Agreement issues and on permanent status (the latter by the middle of March); the Palestinian side was required to complete the process of revising the National Charter, fight terror and prevent violence, restrict the size of the Palestinian police force to previously agreed levels, and keep PA offices and activities within the areas specified in the Interim Agreement, i.e., outside Jerusalem. In addition, Warren Christopher, in what was virtually his last act as U.S. Secretary of State, provided separate letters to Netanyahu and Arafat in which he articulated the administration's understanding of what was left unsaid in the Hebron Protocol about the three FRDs stipulated in the Interim Agreement. In the letter to Netanyahu (the Arafat letter was not made public), Christopher stated that the last of these should take place no later than mid-1998, and that he had advised Arafat of U.S. views – without stipulating what they were – on *Israel's* [my emphasis] process of determining the extent of the redeployments and designating specified military locations; Israel's view was that this process was to be determined unilaterally by Israel.

The Hebron Agreement was widely seen as a breakthrough because it was the first time that a Likud-led government had negotiated and approved any withdrawal from the Land of Israel and transfer of territory to Palestinian control. As such, it was interpreted as at least implicit endorsement of the underlying premise of the Oslo process, despite Netanyahu's vigorous protests to the contrary. This was viewed as a positive development by Palestinians and by those in Israel committed to Oslo, particularly since the redeployment itself was carried out immediately and was promptly followed by renewed high-level Israeli-Palestinian contacts and agreement to set up the committees that would negotiate implementation of the outstanding issues of the Interim Agreement. But by the very same token, it provoked much suspicion and criticism within the Likud-led coalition and among elements of Netanyahu's public base, including the settler movement. Indeed, one of the leading Likud

ministers, Science Minister Binyamin Begin, resigned in protest against what he interpreted as a betrayal of basic principles of the “national camp.”

In order to allay fears that the Hebron Agreement was merely the first step on a slippery slope, Netanyahu undertook two measures that would influence the atmosphere in which subsequent events developed. The first was the decision in late February to proceed with the construction of a housing project on Har Homa (Jabal Abu Ghneim) in the southern suburbs of Jerusalem. The second was a Cabinet decision in early March to limit the first FRD to 9 percent of the West Bank, including 7 percent to be transferred from Area B (already under Palestinian civil control) to Area A (Palestinian civil and internal security control). In many cases, Palestinians were inclined to belittle the significance of Area B, since they believed that the continuing presence of Israeli security forces there compromised their authority. In this case, however, they argued that most of the proposed redeployment covered territory they already had, and that only 2 percent was “really” slated to be transferred from Israeli jurisdiction (in Area C) to the PA. This they viewed as altogether unacceptable, and the PA refused to legitimize the proposal by cooperating in arranging the logistics of the handover. Israel briefly considered withdrawing unilaterally, but then rejected that idea. Thus the first FRD was suspended, and it had still not been carried out by the end of the year. As a further sign of protest, Yasir Arafat also ordered that the negotiations on other issues, including permanent status, be suspended.

For the rest of the year, the Israeli government and the PA maintained intermittent contact, but their direct interaction was essentially confined to exchanges of accusations of noncompliance with the obligations under Oslo that had been reaffirmed in the Hebron Agreement. Israel charged the Palestinian Authority with failure to complete the process of amending the Palestinian National Covenant and, more important, of not carrying out its obligations to combat terror by confiscating unlicensed weapons, arresting and transferring to Israel or trying suspected terrorists, ensuring that convicted terrorists carried out their sentences (rather than engaging in what Israeli critics called a “revolving door” policy of passing public sentences and then quietly arranging for the convicts to be released, or to “escape,” from prison), and generally cracking down on the “terrorist infrastructure” – the organizational and structural base of Hamas. The charge that Arafat was insufficiently

vigilant in combating terrorism gained added resonance in March, when a Palestinian worker set off a charge in the Apropos Cafe in Tel Aviv, killing three Israelis, including the mother of a small baby, as well as himself. The PA, for its part, charged Israel with failing to implement the "safe passage" between Gaza and the West Bank, delaying completion of the Gaza port and airport, refusing to release all Palestinians jailed for offenses committed before the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP), attempting to reduce the Palestinian presence in East Jerusalem by confiscating resident identity cards, and continuing to confiscate land and expand settlements. To the extent that these charges were valid – and there was considerable merit to the accusations of both sides – they both reflected and contributed to a deep-seated mutual lack of confidence that pervaded any efforts either by the belligerents themselves or by would-be mediators to inject some momentum into the stalled negotiations.

It is true that the two major decision makers, whatever their real inclinations may have been, were partly hobbled by domestic problems and constrained from doing more to accommodate the concerns of the other side. Immediately after the Hebron redeployment, Netanyahu became embroiled in a scandal involving the appointment of a relatively obscure Jerusalem lawyer, Roni Bar-On, as Attorney-General, allegedly in order to protect Aryeh Der'i, the chairman of the Shas Party, whose support was indispensable to the government's Knesset majority. Although the police investigators recommended that Netanyahu, along with his Justice Minister and the Director-General of the Prime Minister's Office, be indicted for breach of public trust, the Solicitor-General and new Attorney-General (appointed following Bar-On's resignation) eventually decided that there was insufficient evidence of criminal intent to warrant an indictment. But even after the "Bar-On Affair" faded, Netanyahu was faced with a continuing series of crises – the resignation of Finance Minister Dan Meridor, the "Mash'al Affair" (see below), a controversy over the proposed enactment of a law regulating religious conversion, an internal Likud revolt over nomination procedures, and, toward the end of the year, a bruising intracoalition budget battle and the resignation of Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister David Levy. For most of the year, there was a sense that the government was under siege, and in these circumstances, Netanyahu was unable to risk his fragile majority with measures that could be portrayed as appeasement of the Palestinians.



Arafat, too, came under increasing domestic criticism for his high-handed methods and lack of accountability, particularly his dismissive attitude toward the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). The PLC, although dominated by a large Fatah majority, viewed itself as a kind of watchdog of government procedures, and it showed increasing impatience with evidence of mismanagement and corruption. Following publication of an audit by the General Control Office in late spring that documented massive waste and misdirection of public funds, Arafat barely averted a PLC vote of no confidence in the Executive Council and a demand that all Cabinet ministers resign.

Nevertheless, domestic weakness was only a partial explanation of the paralysis. The fact is that the parties were deeply divided by genuine differences of interpretation over what was required of them by the Oslo Agreements, Christopher's letters notwithstanding. On the question of Har Homa, for example, the Israeli position was that the project in question was not a settlement, that even if it were, settlement activity was not prohibited during the interim period (the 1993 DOP defined settlements as a final status issue), and that even if it had been, agreements covering the West Bank and Gaza did not apply to Jerusalem. Indeed, the emotional resonance of the Jerusalem connection was so great – Netanyahu's election was partly due to his charge that Shimon Peres, if re-elected, would divide Jerusalem – that most of the Israeli opposition could not bring itself to criticize the decision to begin work on Har Homa and was reduced to arguing that the timing was wrong. For all these reasons, it was inconceivable that Netanyahu (who, when leader of the opposition, had himself voted against the previous government's decision to expropriate the site of the project) would resist an initiative by the mayor of Jerusalem (a Likud rival of the Prime Minister) to begin now. By contrast, the Palestinians believed that even if settlements were not explicitly mentioned in the DOP, they were precluded by the undertaking of both sides to refrain from unilateral actions during the interim period that would prejudice the outcome of permanent status negotiations. Moreover, they insisted that all of Jerusalem beyond the 1949 Armistice Line was an intrinsic part of the West Bank, and that any provisions of the Oslo process that applied to the West Bank also applied to East Jerusalem, unless stipulated otherwise.

The parties were similarly divided in their understanding of the FRDs. The Israeli position was that the "specified military loca-