Information Technologies and International Security: Research and Decision-Making Issues

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Advanced information technology has had a major impact on both the study and practice of diplomacy and international relations. Electronic mail, data bases, and, most importantly, the INTERNET and World Wide Web (WWW) have created far greater access to reliable information on government policies, official texts of documents, and news reports than was possible just a few years ago.

This is also true in the case of the Middle East. The comprehensive Arab-Israeli negotiations that began with the Madrid Conference in October 1991 coincided with the growth of the Internet. Since then, most of the documents related to the agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty (signed in October 1994), and the multilateral working groups on arms control and regional security (ACRS), water, environment, economic cooperation, and refugees have been made available through the Internet. In addition, daily news reports, commentaries, statements by political leaders, and academic papers and conference summaries dealing with events in the Middle East and the negotiation process are available.

This information is primarily used by academics, journalists and analysts, and, to an increasing degree, by policy makers and government officials. To date, in the Middle East, the role of electronic information technology in general, and the Internet, in particular, in the diplomatic process itself is quite limited. The first significant experiment in the use of the Internet to promote direct cooperation was linked to the Amman Economic Summit, which took place in October 1995. In preparation for this conference, in which over 60 nations participated, the United States Commerce Department created a "homepage" on the Internet.1

In addition, the informal "track two" process that parallel the formal meetings of the multilateral working groups have begun to make use of the Internet for exchanging ideas and providing information. The Institute on Global Cooperation and Conflict (IGCC) at the University of California is very active in these activities. The Multilateral IGCC home page is designed "to serve as a clearinghouse of information and analysis, from all parties and perspectives, on the multilateral talks." Specific information and documents relating to each of the working groups is available, as well as working papers the conference on "PROMOTING REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST," that took place in November 1994.

Other nodes, such as the Cooperative Monitoring Center, operated by the Sandia National Laboratories, provide information on verification technologies and scenarios that are applicable to the Middle East.

There are many other academic internet sites providing both generalized and highly specific data and information on the Middle East. These include the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Texas at Austin, theUniversity of Durham, and the MIDDLE EAST WATER INFORMATION NETWORK (MEWIN) at the University of Pennsylvania. In Israel, the BESA and Jaffee Centers for Strategic Studies are both in the process of developing information and documentation sites.

Systematic news and information services from Israel are available through the Israeli Information Service, which is operated by the Information Division of the Israeli Foreign Ministry . In addition to daily news summaries (ISRAELINE) and analyses from the Israeli press, there are also texts of official government papers, speeches, and documents. In addition, the Jerusalem Post (a privately-owned English-language daily newspaper) and Ha'aretz (a Hebrew language daily) can be accessed on the Internet.

Arab governments do not provide similar information services on the INTERNET, but monthly summaries of the Arab press are available from other sources such as Jerusalem One and Morocco provides news summaries. Palestinian organizations and universities, such as Birzeit, are also linked to the Internet , as are a number of organizations in Egypt, such as RITSEC and the American University in Cairo Center for Academic Computing. In addition, sites are located at Kuwait University, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Private sector links are available in Jordan, and Bahrain is attempting to build a Internet hub designed to be provide services to much of the Arab world. However, this will take many years, and will require fundamental improvements in the communications infrastructure.

There are also many sources of information available from more general sources on the Internet. In the United States, the White House, State Department, and many other agencies provide a daily flow of texts and documents, including information relevant to the Arab-Israeli negotiations. The texts of the news conferences, Congressional testimony, and background briefings by senior officials are often important sources of information and analysis. DFAX (dfax@csf.colorado.edu) provides monthly summaries of news reports and documents relating to arms control, arms transfers, and peace keeping, and much of this material is relevant to the Middle East. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has made its library acquisition lists and indexed journal articles available in. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and NATO also operate WWW sites and provide information on the respective activities of these groups with respect to the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean.

In addition to these public sources of information, there are a number of commercial databases and electronic mail providers that provide access to major newspapers and journals. For most academics and policy makers, however, the information provided by these sources beyond that available over the Internet and the World Wide Web is limited and of marginal importance.

In addition, there are thousands of newsgroups (USENET) that consist of unrestricted and unfiltered exchanges of views and opinions. A number deal with issues of relevance to the Middle East, but the reliability of information and claims posted in these groups varies widely. A relatively complete summary of relevant sites can found in "The Middle East-North Africa Internet Resource Guide, Parts I, II, and III", compiled by Joseph W. Roberts. It is available via the University of Utah Middle East Center Gopher (mideast01.hum.utah.edu).

Assessing the Impact

The Internet and other electronic information systems have greatly expanded the access to documents, texts, and news summaries. Academics, researchers, and policy makers who use the Internet are able to exchange ideas and information much faster than in the past, faster exchange of ideas and information, articles and analyses can be circulated more quickly and to a wider audience. This is particularly true for analysts of the Middle East negotiation process. In addition, internet networks (servers, gophers, and email lists) that are devoted to specific issues, such as water an economic cooperation allow technical advisors and policy makers to access and exchange with a great deal of efficiency.

However, to is difficult to measure the direct impact of the availability of these information resources, if any, on events in the Middle East. There is a high degree of the asymmetry between Israel and the Arabs world with respect to use of electronic information services. Israel has one of the highest per-capita rates of Internet links in the world, while, in comparison, most institutions and individuals in the Arab countries lack similar access. Without a suitable communications infrastructure and computer access, this technology is not the "great equalizer" among nations and communities.2 (The US government's Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory has program designed to accelerate the development of internet access, with the involvement of US computer firms.) To those with access, the internet does reduce the role of distance and the quality of libraries, but this is not the case in much of the Middle East. (In addition, wide access to Internet in closed societies has important political implications that are beyond the scope of this brief analysis.) Many countries in the region have some internet links through academic computing centers and scientific research networks (such as the Tunisian National Research and Technology Network.

Most applications for electronic information systems involving academics and participants in the conflict resolution process in the Middle East are passive, rather than interactive. This is, in part, as a result of access limitations in many countries. Academics and policy makers who do have access to the internet often use it to retrieve information and documents, while the interactive aspects are still limited. Some sites, such as that operated by the IGCC, are interactive, and allow for exchanges of information and assessments among users. In addition, the USENET users' groups are highly interactive, such as Egypt-Net and JORDANNEWS-L , but are of lesser importance for policy making and analysis.

With respect to the issue of reliability, the Internet sources provided by governments, academic institutions, and the press, provide reliable efficient access to primary sources, including the official texts of documents, speeches, and news articles. The Internet is based on the principle of universal access, and many other sources provide information of questionable reliability. However, in this sense, the Internet is no different from the traditional print and broadcast information sources. Footnotes:

1- The United States Commerce Department Homepage for the Amman Economic Summit was designed to provide the business community in the private sector with information on "projects and opportunities" for which Middle Eastern countries are seeking partners, and to provide regional firms and agencies with data on potential suppliers, contractors, and partners. The homepage includes an abstract of each project, and information from feasibility studies and with respect to financing.

2- "Why Political Scientists Should Use Internet Resources", A GUIDED TOUR AND RESEARCH BY CREATOR Peter Adams

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