Chequebook diplomacy in the cause of Islam: FOREIGN POLICY
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Top level to-ing and fro-ing this year: King Khaled arrives on a state visit and, right, Mrs Thatcher greeted by Prince Fahd in Riyadh

Chequebook diplomacy in the cause of Islam

FOREIGN POLICY
by Ian Black

ARAB diplomatic activity is a dramatic and often mysterious business. Crises erupt and countries teeter on the brink of war; tension mounts and is defused; harsh words and accusations are exchanged, then the conflicts are resolved, the insults forgotten, and all are called upon to close ranks for the sake of common goals. When such upsets occur, as they do with depressing frequency, Saudi Arabia is always somewhere in the picture.

Pressing for restraint, urging caution, delivering soothing messages hither and thither, Saudi diplomats command the respect — if not always the obedience — due to the richest and most economically influential member of the Arab League.

It is in the Middle East, naturally, that Saudi Arabia wields its most effective clout. Its influence there has enhanced the importance of its relations with the United States and highlighted the problem of its lack of diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union. Links with the EEC, too, have become stronger in recent years.

The watchword of Saudi foreign policy is Arab unity. Its constant striving for the maximum pan-Arab consensus in the face of often bitter and irreconcilable divisions is the linchpin of its regional strategy, and, in turn, the point which (together with its control of 26 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves) interests its non-Arab friends.

The Saudis' task, even with the vast financial resources at their disposal, is not an easy one. "Cheque-book diplomacy" — a term cynically applied to rich Arab states but rarely to the disbursements of Western countries — has its limits. This was never more starkly underlined than by the failure to win sufficient Arab support for Crown Prince Fahd's eight-point Middle East peace plan at the Fez summit conference last month.

Like other Arab and Western states, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is still echoing to the shock of President Sadat's journey to Jerusalem in November, 1977. The "separate" peace he subsequently concluded with Israel robbed the Arab world of the country that had assumed the mantle of its leadership since the days of Nasser. It also ended, in any realistic sense, the possibility of the military option in dealing with the Jewish state. Any future jihad would have to be fought with political and economic weapons.

Sadat's defection was a cruel blow for the Saudis, all the more so for the fact that post-Nasser Egypt had enjoyed warm relations with Riyadh. It was the Saudis, after all, who encouraged the Egyptian rais to expel the Soviet advisers in 1972, an act which many now see as the prelude to his later dramatic change of course.

Shreds of this friendship with Cairo could be seen in the Saudis' role at the Baghdad summit in 1978, where they urged the more headstrong of Sadat's enemies to wait and see if Egypt really would do the unthinkable and make peace with Begin. The divisiveness had to be postponed, and when its eruption could not be prevented, at least contained.

The caution has been repeated since. Riyadh has staunchly resisted attempts by Libya and Syria to have the sanctions against Egypt extended to Sudan and Oman, and it has recently taken the lead in proposing a "period of grace" for President Mubarak. Partly through the good offices of King Hassan of Morocco, and partly directly, links with Egypt, though formally severed, have remained close.

But there are strictly defined limits to Saudi tolerance. If it is to remain the arbiter of Arab solidarity it cannot be seen to condone "treachery" or "capitulation" in any form, especially since its own relations with the United States lay it open, in the eyes of the radical Arab regimes, to precisely such charges.

Riyadh's own attitude to Israel underscores the fragility of its diplomatic position. For all the publicity that surrounded it, the Fahd plan was little more than a rehash of existing UN resolutions on the Middle East. Point seven, which was widely, though by no means universally, interpreted as implying the first ever Arab recognition of the Jewish state, remained ambiguous—too ambiguous, at least, for Washington, which is what really counts.

If Sadat's initiative pushed the Saudi diplomatic world to the brink of disintegration, the fall of the Shah and the rise and tribulations of the Islamic Republic in Iran brought the fear of trouble nearer home. The encouragement of Shi'ite revivalism in the Gulf, the traumatic siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and Iranian charges of Saudi "godlessness" during the haj have made the dangers all too tangible.

The Gulf War, now well into its second year, has shaken regional security, and provided a boost for the creation of the Gulf Co-operation Council — although its members have shown some signs of not bending to the Saudi will as much as Riyadh must have hoped. The Saudis support Iraq and exulted in its military progress, but the long conflict has increased the country's general sense of exposure to hostile forces.

A combination of hard cash and persuasive arguments has enabled Riyadh to keep that hostility at bay. Everywhere it fights the wars of Arab and Islamic solidarity; helping Pakistan against the godless Marxists of Kabul, North Yemen against the Peoples Republic in the south, Somali and Eritrean rebels fighting the pro-Moscow Ethiopian regime, Sudan against Colonel Gadafy, and King Hassan of Morocco against his Polisario guerrilla enemy.

Quarrels are patched up with the help of the generosity of the House of Saud. Its beneficiaries are carefully chosen and groomed.

The dilemma of the Saudi position is that the Arab world which it seeks to unite, and thus to lead, has a strictly limited capacity for political moderation. Caution and restraint are rare commodities in a region where obeisance to slogans still carries more weight than prudent foresight. The position is awkward and often uncomfortable. But there is too much at stake for it to be abandoned in favour of anything very different.