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"THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT"

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Journal of Palestine Studies

Conference:

THE MEDITERRANEAN CRISIS: EVOLUTION IN THE BALANCE OF POWER  
AND PROBLEMS OF MANAGEMENT

ROME, 24-26 April 1975

There are three aspects of the Middle East conflict which, though definable separately, form a single interconnected whole. The discussion of any one aspect presupposes the discussion of the other two. The first aspect is seen in the superpower confrontation; the second in the energy crisis; and the third in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Thus there can be no lasting settlement without the agreement and cooperation of the two great powers. This implies that the negotiation toward a fruitful settlement cannot be carried out by the United States alone but should include the Soviet Union.

Moreover, the conflict cannot be separated from the problem of oil. So long as the Middle East crisis continues, the supply and price of oil will be threatened.

Finally, the Middle East conflict is essentially the Arab-Israeli conflict and no final solution is possible without the solution of the Palestine problem.

#### The Role of the Super-Powers.

A major result of the last (1973) Arab-Israeli war was the considerable gain in United States' political influence in the region and the corresponding decline of the Soviet position.

In the Arab world the October war brought to an effective end the period of Nasserism and the beginning of a new configuration of power based on pragmatic unity among the Arab states irrespective of their social and ideological systems. The two countries which formed the new power axis were Saudi Arabia and Egypt, one the richest and the other the largest and strongest country in the Arab world.

Nasserism, which had dominated the power system in the Arab World since the mid-fifties, presupposed the polarization of the two super-powers in the Middle East. The Arabs under Nasser leaned heavily on Soviet support in their confrontation with Israel. The new Egyptian-Saudi alliance, on the other hand, has moved away from the Soviet Union and toward dependence on the United States in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Seen in the broader international context, the American position in the region has been strengthened not only in so far as the Arab-Israeli conflict is concerned but also in the vital

areas of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf. It can thus be said that so long as the Egyptian-Saudi axis maintains its hegemony in the new Arab configuration of power, an American-oriented system of stability will prevail in the region. The Egyptian-Saudi hegemony, however, cannot be preserved unless the American peace effort is successful.

Is an exclusively American-oriented system of stability possible in the Middle East?

The erosion of the Soviet position was in part produced by the belief that American diplomacy could achieve what the Soviet Union had failed to achieve, namely, a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Egypt and Saudi Arabia have put all their eggs in the American basket. Their gamble has come under increasingly heavy fire in the Arab world, and unless a break-through is achieved their position will sooner or later become untenable. The American option, however, has to be taken and carried to the end before any shift becomes possible.

It is perhaps not surprising that the Americans are beginning to realize that they cannot resolve the conflict without bringing in the Soviet Union. Ever since the Vladivostok conference the Americans have moved towards a position of allowing the Soviet Union to play a role in the peace-making process. The step-by-step approach which Dr. Kissinger had advocated has gradually given way to the collective approach which the Soviet Union, and some Arab countries such as Algeria and Syria as well as the PLO, had called for all along. The piece-meal approach, which marked the phase of American diplomatic ascendancy, has now begun to give way to the whole-sale approach marking the phase of full Soviet participation. It can be said that the attempts to push the Soviet Union out of the region has failed. That attempt has resulted not in a settlement of the Middle East conflict but in a new polarization. The Soviet Union is a Middle Eastern power, and the Middle East is vital to its security. It is impossible to prevent the Soviet Union from playing its role in any Middle Eastern settlement.

It is now clear that detente cannot be firmly achieved anywhere in the world if it is not achieved in the Middle East. And detente in the Middle East is possible because it has been amply demonstrated that the fundamental objectives which motivate Soviet policy in the area are precisely those which dominate the policy of the United States: Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories, guarantees for the existence of Israel, an end

to the arms race, and lasting peace and stability in the region.

The increasing awareness that an end to the Middle East conflict can be established only in agreement with the Soviet Union has shifted the ground of negotiations to the kind of framework where the Soviet Union can play its proper role, namely, to multi-party negotiations. Barring some irrational miscalculation, the superpowers may soon find themselves engaged in an effort at Geneva that might so reduce the Middle East crisis as to pave the way to settlement; if this were to come about it might constitute a corner-stone in the global system of detente.

#### The Middle East Conflict and Oil.

The most direct way the Middle East conflict can affect the energy crisis is through the imposition of an Arab oil embargo.

Some observers have argued that the Arab countries may be reluctant to use the oil weapon again, even if Israel were to attack Syria or Egypt or both. An embargo, it is argued, would have limited impact as the industrialized countries have accumulated considerable reserves of oil since the October war and have made arrangements to share energy resources among themselves in time of crisis. These observers point out that the Arab countries would probably do better by maintaining the flow of oil and keep the revenues coming in and thereby be in a better position to exert pressure on the industrialized countries.

Others argue that another war will inevitably force the Arab oil-producing countries to impose an oil embargo, regardless of financial considerations. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries would not be likely to sit back if the more militant producers, such as Iraq, Libya, and Algeria, imposed the embargo. A reduction in production of probably up to 40 per cent will accompany any embargo to make ineffective the sharing of energy resources among members of the International Energy Agency. Under such conditions oil reserves of the individual countries will probably prove insufficient and thus force these countries to pursue independent policies regarding the Middle East.

Of course, under such circumstances the temptation of the United States to intervene in the Arab oil-producing countries will be very strong. How likely is American intervention under such conditions and how effective would it be?

As far as the ability to intervene is concerned the Pentagon strategists seem convinced that landing and occupation operations can be mounted successfully. As to whether there will be a decision to intervene will depend on the mood prevailing at the White House and on the feeling in Congress and among the military leaders. Given certain conditions an American intervention in the Arab oil-producing countries must be considered as both possible and probable.

But if the will to intervene may be problematic the result of intervention is not. There is general agreement among observers that it would result in various types of reactions all of which could be disastrous in their effect. The Arabs may destroy oil facilities, such as jetties and pumping stations, causing disruption in the flow of oil for several months. Or they may blow up entire oil fields, sparking wide-scale upheaval. Under such circumstances one can envisage conditions of wide-spread chaos, with American and Western interests and personnel becoming targets of indiscriminate attack. "Intervention", as Mohammad Hassanien Heikal, the former editor of Al-Ahram, put it, "would make the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam seem like picnics".

From all this it appears certain that the solution of the Middle East conflict will have a direct impact on the energy crisis. In the first place, the need to use the oil weapon would decrease or altogether disappear; and differences over production and prices would have a better chance of being resolved under conditions of stability and peace than under conditions of crisis and the threat of war. If peace were achieved the flow of oil would be assured through old and new pipelines pouring into Mediterranean ports, and with the opening of the Suez Canal, costs would be reduced. The main beneficiaries of such developments would be the Mediterranean consumers who have suffered most as a result of war and tension in the Middle East.

On the other hand, so long as the Middle East conflict remains unresolved all Arab countries, regardless of their ideological or political orientations, will continue to be involved in it, poisoning their relations with the industrialized

countries and adding to the crisis and uncertainty in the energy and financial systems.

It is worth noting that by their threats to use force the Americans have contributed to increasing tension and undermining the confidence of Arab countries in Western intentions. Dr. Kissinger's remarks, reaffirmed and supported on different occasions by President Ford, Vice-President Rockefeller and Defence Secretary Schlesinger, seem to have predisposed large segments of American public opinion in favor of the use of force. This appears to be in line with American attempts to keep the Arab countries off balance and to form an oil consumers' front composed of the industrialized countries. The United States has called for discriminatory measures against Arab and other OPEC countries in the latest trade legislation by Congress, put pressure on international agencies to stop extending loans to OPEC countries, and exhibited increasing reluctance to provide adequate guarantees to the producers as to the future value of their current surplus revenues. Furthermore, the United States is still doing all it can to prevent the European countries and Japan from adopting independent energy policies suited to their own specific needs and susceptibilities and to confront the Arabs with an aggressive Western front.

In the Middle East conflict, on the energy level as well as on other levels, the only alternative to confrontation is negotiation. The United States is the key factor in determining the solution of the Middle East conflict and in finding the way out of the energy crisis. If the United States, then, is genuinely interested in finding an equitable solution to the Middle East conflict and the energy crisis, it is essential that its actions aiming at confrontation and intervention be abandoned and replaced by more rational and less aggressive positions, such as those taken by France and Japan.

#### The Arab-Israeli Conflict.

The core of the Middle East crisis is the Arab-Israeli conflict and there is general agreement that no solution of this conflict is possible without the solution of the problem of the Palestinians.

For a long time the Israelis have ignored the Palestinians and refused to acknowledge any role for them in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Thus, the official position of the Israeli Foreign Office toward the Palestinians has been that they "are not a party to the conflict between Israel and the Arab States". The well-known comment made in 1969 by Mrs. Meir, the former prime minister of Israel, reveals the long standing Zionist attitude toward the Palestinians. "It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took away their country from them", she said. "They did not exist".

More recently there has been some change in the Israeli position. Foreign Minister Yigal Alon admitted not too long ago that "a Palestinian problem" did exist and that its solution was a precondition for the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But he saw the problem as one of "identity" rather than of "rights" and dismissed the Palestinian demands for national self-determination as contrary to Israeli sovereignty.

Although the position of the Israeli government is somewhat more realistic than it was a few years ago, it still falls short of that taken by most countries in the world regarding the rights of the Palestinians.

The international community, with the exception of the United States - together with Chile, Bolivia and one or two other Central American States - has come to view the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict as based on assuring justice to both the Israelis and the Palestinians. This implies the recognition of Palestinian rights, the withdrawal of Israel from Egyptian and Syrian territories occupied in 1967, the establishment of a Palestinian national authority in the West Bank, Gaza and Arab Jerusalem, and the guaranteeing of Israel's territorial security. This is the same position taken by the international community over a quarter of a century ago when it voted in 1947 the Partition Plan which divided Palestine into a Jewish state and a Palestinian state and gave Jerusalem an international status.

The Israeli government still refuses to recognize the PLO or to negotiate with the PLO. As King Hussein of Jordan is no longer (since the Rabat Conference of 1974) the spokesman for the Palestinians, the Israelis have no means of dealing with the Palestinians. Israel may now regret not having negotiated

with King Hussein before the PLO had gained international recognition, and would probably agree to deal with him if conditions required it. But unless Israel recognizes the PLO and thereby the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination there is little likelihood of progress in the direction of a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

But it is probably easier for Israel to recognize the PLO than for the PLO to recognize Israel. The Palestinians by granting recognition to Israel would be renouncing their rights to most of the land which they once possessed in its entirety, while the Israelis in recognizing the PLO would be simply adapting themselves to a political reality. True, implicit in the Israeli action may be acceptance of the principle of Palestinian self-determination and Palestinian authority over part of Palestine (namely, less than 20 per cent of Palestine), but Palestinian action in granting legitimacy to Israeli sovereignty means in fact giving up their birth-right. The Palestinians have much more to lose than the Israelis by the act of mutual recognition.

Stated in these terms the problem is put as it would appear from the Palestinian point of view. Within the larger Arab world context the problem is somewhat different. The Arab "confrontation" states have committed themselves to de facto recognition of Israel and to signing a peace agreement with her once a settlement is reached. For the Arab states, a peace settlement would result in the restoration of all their territories, the achievement of all their immediate goals. For the Palestinians, on the other hand, it will result only in restoration of territories occupied in 1967, and simultaneously in the relinquishing of the rest of Palestine.

The Palestinian pragmatists reject the all-or-nothing approach of the militants and call for compromise and realism in dealing with the present situation. They argue that Israel cannot be destroyed by war and that failure to achieve settlement now will lead to Israel's de facto absorption of the rest of Palestine. They see a peace settlement bringing about an end to Israeli expansionism and with it its religious and racist exclusivism. They see the possibility of genuine Palestinian-Israeli coexistence and in time cooperation between the two people leading even to federation or a bi-national state - to something along the lines of a "secular democratic Palestine" -.



There is opposition to this line of thought in Palestinian and Arab ranks. A political settlement based on surrender of rights that the Palestinians have struggled to preserve since the early 1920's is hard for most Palestinians and many Arabs to accept. The militants argue that the PLO should resist compromise at any cost, especially now that the Arabs have entered into a new era of economic and political power. It seems certain that were the present efforts to a peaceful settlement to be rebuffed, the militant opposition could gain the upper hand in the Arab world.

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n° Inv. 10273  
19 MAG. 1991

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