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America's Objectives in the Middle East

by Maj. Robert B. Adolph, Jr. and
Maj. Frank Moore III

The following article presents a general overview of a very complex situation. Readers are encouraged to consult more extensive readings, that due to space constraints this bulletin cannot accommodate, to gain a better understanding of the subject matter presented here.

Modern Israel had its genesis in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British made the following proclamation: "His Majesty's government favors the establishment in Palestine of a national home for Jewish people . . . it being clearly understood that nothing will be done to prejudice the rights of

the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

The migration of European and Czarist Russian Jews into Palestine began in earnest during World War I and stepped up after the Paris Peace Conference. The first Jewish-Arab clash occurred in 1926. Three years later, there was a major clash which erupted into the Arab Revolt in the early '30s. Israeli success in the independence struggle of 1947-49 caused over a million Palestinians to flee their homes for neighboring Egypt, Transjordan, Syria and Lebanon. The neighboring Arab states, smarting over military defeats at the hands of the Israelis and fearful for their territory, continued a posture of hostility to the newcomers.

The American public, however, generally looked upon Israel with sympathy. Americans felt a deep sense of compassion for the immigrants stemming from Nazi Germany's murder of six million Jews during World War II. Following the war, the immigrants were, for the most part, Europeans with cultural, philosophical and racial ties to the West. Both Britain and France were early supporters of the fledgling Jewish state. Israel was perceived as the only democracy in the region. The Jewish community in the United States undertook major public relations, political lobbying, fund raising and philanthropy efforts on behalf of the Israelis. The net effect of these efforts was that Israel found friends among Americans

of all ethnic and religious groups.

Thus, the continued survival of Israel became a major cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. America was the first to recognize the new state on its birth in 1948, and since then it has usually supported the Israeli diplomatically in the international arena. Although there was some friction as a result of Israel's 1956 invasion of the Sinai, Washington has been a dependable source of funds for the Jewish state, having provided some \$27 billion in military aid and \$10 billion in economic assistance — or roughly \$12 thousand for every Israeli citizen — during the period from 1948 to 1983.¹ It is understandable that the Arab states came to view U.S. policy in the region as skewed in favor of Israel, though most American arms support came after the "67" war.

East-West tensions grew steadily after 1947. The Berlin Blockade (1948), the fall of the Kuomintang regime in China (1949), the Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb and the start of the Korean War lent a new sense of urgency to the need to contain Soviet influence. Quite naturally, American moves in the Middle East during the early 1950s reflected this view. Under the rubric of the Eisenhower Doctrine, the defensive perimeter begun by President Truman was to be extended from Turkey into Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. Engineered by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the Baghdad Pact was designed to cement this wall by joining Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Britain and the United States into a formal military alliance. Syria, Jordan and Lebanon all refused to participate, however, and Egypt's stridently nationalist president, Gamal Nassar, went so far as to call the Pact "an imperialist front." As related by George Lenczowski: "The Arab view of these doctrines — Truman and Eisenhower — was a negative one. Their argument was that the United States was attempting to defend them from the imaginary danger of Soviet aggression, whereas the real danger stemmed from the presence of Israel."²

Here is the nub of the contradiction in America's policy in the Middle East. America, as a global power, put great emphasis on the need to restrain the expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union and to this end sought allies in the Middle East, as elsewhere. But Washington's continued support of Israel alienated the very Arab states which

America sought as allies. This, in turn, created an opportunity for the Soviets to expand their influence in the region, which was the very thing that America was seeking to forestall in the first place. To the north and east of the Arab world, "Plugging the 'gap' between Turkey and Pakistan did not result in containing the Soviets as anticipated, for within months after the Pact came into force, the Soviet Union expanded its influence for the first time deep into the Arab world through the sale of arms and the extension of economic aid, first to Egypt, then to Syria and, after 1958, to Iraq as well."³

Past Political Trends

When the global political trends of the late 1940s through the early 1960s are analyzed, two distinct, striking phenomena meet the eye; superpower competition in the North and decolonization in the South.

The Soviet Union sought to consolidate its hold over Eastern Europe through the formation of the Warsaw Pact and the Committee for Economic Cooperation (COMECON). Anti-Soviet uprisings in East Germany, Poland and Hungary were brutally crushed. Moscow attempted to enmesh China into a communist continental system through economic and military aid, but Beijing later proved to have a mind of its own. America, for its part, sought to contain Soviet influence through the formation of political and military alliances in Europe, the Middle East and Asia (NATO, the Baghdad Pact, CENTO, SEATO, etc.), but with mixed success.

Decolonization in the South occurred in two distinct phases. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the former colonial powers — France, Britain, Holland, Portugal and Belgium — fought wars in their prewar colonies in an attempt to retain direct political control. Successful nationalist struggles in Vietnam, Algeria, Indonesia and elsewhere forced the colonial powers to grant the colonies independence, often over the objections of influential circles at home.

But many nationalist leaders in the Third World — Ben Bella in Algeria, Nkrumah in Ghana, Sukarno in Indonesia and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, among others — perceived the mere granting of sovereignty as unacceptable. Even after independence, strong economic and diplomatic ties continued to bind the newly independent states to their former masters. The nationalists believed

that true independence would come only when the states of the Third World charted their own economic courses and were free to pursue truly independent foreign policies. Domestically, this entailed the expropriation of foreign business holdings and virulent anticolonial political rhetoric. Internationally, this spelled the formation of Afro-Asian and regional diplomatic blocs.

As a logical corollary, leaders in the Third World who were perceived as insufficiently nationalist, or not sufficiently anticolonialist, found themselves with rapidly evaporating political support both domestically and internationally. Revolutions and military coups were the frequent, predictable result. In Egypt, King Farouk was overthrown by the charismatic and militant Col. Nasser. A similarly fatal tie with the former colonial powers caused the fall of Regent Abdul Ilah of Iraq at the hands of Col. Kassem, who was supported by Nasser. Militant Pan-Arab nationalism set the stage for the rise of Arab socialist Baathist regimes in both Iraq and Syria (1963).

Keeping in mind this hypersensitivity to real or imagined encroachments on national sovereignty, it is easy to understand how national leaders in the Third World in general, and in the Arab world in particular, would be loathe to enter any security arrangements with foreign powers that might carry the aroma of neocolonialism. To do so would paint a leader as a puppet of the colonial powers and would be political suicide. Thus, the Baghdad Pact, and any proposed alliance system resembling it, was almost doomed from its inception.

In Search of Balance

The inauguration of John F. Kennedy in January of 1961 signaled the beginning of a more imaginative and realistic approach to American foreign policy. Although the fundamental objective remained the same — the containment of communism and Soviet influence — Kennedy put increased emphasis on the need to address Third World concerns, most notably in the area of socioeconomic development. This emphasis was evident in the formation of the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress. At the same time, his administration also sought to build bridges to Third World leaders through the provision of military aid. In 1962 he authorized Egypt \$220 million in military sup-

plies. Between 1962 and 1967 the United States transferred \$71 million in military hardware to Jordan. Syria, however, rebuffed similar American overtures. Events were soon to occur which ensured even greater U.S. support to Israel.

American policy took a sharp swing in Israel's favor as a result of the 1967 June war. Israel's swift victory in the Sinai, the West Bank and in the Golan Heights won the Jewish state widespread popular admiration in America. Washington replaced Britain and France as Israel's chief source of arms imports. In 1968 President Johnson approved the sale to Israel of 50 F-4 Phantom jet fighters valued at \$220 million.⁴

Jordan's King Hussein, a moderate Arab leader with ties to the West, requested that his country also be provided with F-4 fighters. His participation in the struggle against Israel notwithstanding, he was generally considered to be pro-American. But the most that President Nixon was prepared to do for him was to offer the obsolete F-104 fighter. Whereas Israel received over \$1 billion in aid during the period from 1967 to 1973, Jordan received only \$150 million.⁵ Jordan was still perceived in Washington as a potential threat to Israel.

1972-73 was a momentous period in Middle Eastern political and military affairs. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat downgraded his diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and sent his Russian military advisors home. He conducted menacing military demonstrations near the Suez Canal to keep the Israelis on edge, then he launched his surprisingly successful military operation on October 6.

While Syrian armored and mechanized brigades overran Israeli positions on the Golan Heights, Egyptian troops stormed the vaunted Barlev line overlooking the canal and drove inland. The world was treated to the heretofore unthinkable sight of Israeli prisoners in Arab captivity. Furious Israeli counterattacks in the Sinai were smashed by dug-in and resolute Egyptian infantry. Israeli aircraft losses were heavy due to the use of Soviet air defense weaponry. Although the Israelis were ultimately successful in retaking the Golan and in forcing their way across the canal, cutting off whole divisions of Egyptians in the process, the myth of Israeli invincibility was broken. Hereafter, the Arabs — and most notably

the Egyptians — were recognized as a force to be reckoned with in American foreign policy.

A more balanced approach was evident in Washington's actions as moderator during the Sinai disengagement talks. Both sides had suffered heavy losses in tanks and aircraft and felt vulnerable to future aggressive actions by the other. Washington sought to allay these fears by offering military and economic aid to both sides contingent on the acceptance of a peace agreement. Although Damascus rejected these overtures out of hand, Cairo appeared receptive.

The Sinai I Agreement (January 18, 1974) saw an Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian lines and the relief of the encircled Egyptian Third Army. The Sinai II Agreement (September 4, 1975) returned the Abu Rudeis oil fields and the Sinai peninsula as far east as the Mitla Pass to Egypt. For these pullbacks the Israelis were awarded significant U.S. military aid. Egypt received mixed packages of U.S. military and economic aid. Syria, for its part, received massive new arms shipments from the Soviet Union.

Although Israel still enjoyed favorable treatment in American diplomacy, the 1973 war forced the United States to make a serious reassessment of its support for the Jewish state up to then. The Arab-led oil embargo and the subsequent rise in petroleum prices caused severe economic dislocation in the West. Some senior American military officers were alarmed at the depletion of NATO war reserve equipment and ammunition stocks caused by Washington's resupply of Israeli forces. All of America's NATO allies, save Portugal, refused landing rights to the American airlift efforts. Clearly U.S. support of Israel was not without cost.

At the same time, there was growing sympathy for the Arab states, most notably Egypt. Although soldiers on both sides displayed courage and tenacity, it was the Arab forces whose reputation improved as a result of the course of the fighting. Politically, Sadat displayed singular courage and independence of action: first by reducing his ties with the Soviets; then by flying to Israel to conclude a peace agreement; and then by his determination to hold to the peace accords in spite of the almost universal condemnation heaped on him by other Arab leaders as well as many Egyptians.

This new sympathy, or at least sensitivity, to the Arab side of the conflict became all the more pronounced under the Carter administration. Shortly after taking office, Carter announced his three-point Middle East Peace Plan. In this document he publicly and formally called for the establishment of a Palestinian homeland. This was unprecedented as no president had dared to openly suggest that Israel might have to relinquish territory as part of a permanent peace settlement.

The notable foreign policy accomplishment of the Carter administration was the signing of the Camp David Peace Accords. Israel agreed to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula with the provision that the area be left demilitarized. A multinational force was to be emplaced to guard against the reintroduction of troops by either side. The Suez Canal was opened to Israeli shipping, and Israel and Egypt opened embassies in each other's capitals.

The peace accords were successful principally because they met the paramount political and military needs of both sides. That Cairo was able to recover the territory lost in the 1967 war served to salve Egypt's sense of humiliation and was a boon to Sadat's domestic prestige. Israel gained a wide buffer zone occupied by third-country troops, but more important, gained formal diplomatic recognition by the largest of its former enemies. Both sides received generous aid packages from Washington. But there was a very large fly in the ointment. In spite of Carter's public call for a Palestinian homeland, there was no formal Palestinian participation in the talks, largely owing to Israel's refusal to deal with "terrorists." More important, the other Arab States (most notably Syria) vociferously condemned the talks and the resulting peace agreement as a sellout. Sadat was later assassinated by Islamic militants and violence continued to flare along Israel's northern border and in neighboring Lebanon. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union replaced Syria's military equipment losses with updated Soviet equipment. Older items of equipment found their way to Palestine Liberation Organization units in Lebanon.

There was a consistent underlying theme of idealism in the Carter administration. This *leitmotif* was most conspicuous in the frequent references to the problems of human rights and the insistence on making adherence to

those principles a precondition for favorable treatment in the conduct of foreign policy. In keeping with this tone of idealism, Carter decried U.S. arms sales. He went so far as to impose an artificial fiscal limit on military credit sales. But the need to exert influence abroad soon proved stronger than the president's idealism. The restrictions on overseas arms transfers were quietly relaxed. Upon leaving office, Carter had outspent both the Ford and Nixon administrations in the field of foreign military credit sales.

New Perspectives

Two events occurred in 1979 that put a radically new perspective on the way in which Washington perceived its interests in the Middle East: the fall of the Shah of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Given America's policy goal of containing Soviet expansionism, it is natural that Iran would play a major role in this strategy. As a source of petroleum for both America and its western European allies, Iran had major economic importance. It bordered on the Soviet Union and blocked Russian access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. At the same time it overlooked the other oil-rich states of the Arabian gulf, giving it major strategic importance. Since the overthrow of the nationalist prime minister, Mossadegh, in 1953, the Shah had proven to be a reliable partner of the West and had supplied oil to both America and Israel at the time of the 1973-74 petroleum export boycott. This obvious economic, strategic and political importance gave Teheran a major role to play in Washington's global and regional strategies. Between 1953 and 1979, the United States transferred approximately \$30 billion in armaments to Iran, in part paid for in cash from the country's ample oil revenues. It therefore came as a major shock to Washington that the Shah, America's "Policeman of the Gulf," would meet with such an abrupt and complete collapse.

The second major shock came in the form of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan kept Washington informed of internal politics in that country. Prime Minister Amin, although a member of President Taraki's Khalqi faction, was educated in the United States and maintained close ties with the U.S. ambassador. However, the U.S. ambassador

was assassinated in January 1979. When Amin seized power nine months later, the Soviets apparently decided to invade, partially because they saw Amin as too unreliable and too close to the United States, and partially due to the feuding between the rival Khalqi and Parcham factions. Although much of the expressed outrage was doubtlessly sincere, cynics might argue that the Soviet intervention presented Washington with a valuable opportunity for political propaganda at Moscow's expense. Nonetheless, this Soviet move to the south led to speculation that the Soviets intended to continue their historical effort to gain warm-water ports on the Indian Ocean. The upshot was increased alarm in Western capitals.

In response to the twin shocks of events in Iran and Afghanistan, Carter made a major effort to shake off his image of being indecisive and irresolute. His policy statement, later known as the "Carter Doctrine," declared that the Persian Gulf and its littoral sites were an area of American vital strategic interest, and that any interruption of the flow of petroleum to the United States or its allies would be cause for American military intervention. To prepare for this eventuality, Carter acquired basing rights on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia. He also organized the Rapid Deployment Force, a collection of Army and Marine Divisions specially earmarked for insertion to potential trouble-spots in the region.

Both the Carter and Reagan administrations attempted to cultivate relationships with Washington's remaining friends in the region, especially after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war. Israel continued to receive generous packages of the latest American weaponry, while smaller packages were offered to Egypt, Jordan, Oman and Saudi Arabia. This revival of the Nixon Doctrine — containment through the provision of material support — ran into occasional political snags. Although the sale was eventually approved, Israel's supporters in Congress balked at the idea of providing AWACS command, control and intelligence aircraft to Saudi Arabia in the belief that the planes might be used in a conflict against Israel. Others argued that the technology involved was too advanced and too sensitive to be entrusted to the Saudis. Israel received several diplomatic setbacks that embarrassed the state in American eyes. Although the

1982 intervention in Lebanon was a smashing military success against Syrian Air Forces, the continued occupation of the country put the Israelis in the unenviable role of policeman and Army of occupation, a role which became increasingly embarrassing after the Sabra and Shatillah refugee camp massacres. The perception of Israeli heavy-handedness in dealing with civil disorders in the West Bank and Gaza strip, as well as Israel's clandestine re-export of American military materials to Third World countries, caused an erosion of the Jewish state's popularity in America.

Finally, mention must be made of America's ill-fated participation in the Lebanon Peacekeeping Force. The net effect of the catastrophic loss of over 200 U.S. Marines in the Beirut airport car bomb attack and the force's ignominious withdrawal diminished the American public's enthusiasm for direct involvement in Middle Eastern security affairs.

In short, the net effect of the events occurring in the Middle East since the signing of the Camp David Peace Accords has not augured well for American policy in the region.

Conclusions

In the official terminology of the Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance Programs, America's general goals for the Middle East are:

- to promote peace,
- to enhance cooperative defense and security,
- to deter and combat aggression, and
- to promote regional stability.

But on examining the needs of America and its allies, and reviewing Washington's activities and pronouncements concerning the region over the past years, U.S. objectives are clearly:

- to limit Soviet military, political and economic influence in the region,
- to safeguard Western access to petroleum supplies from the Arabian Gulf,
- to guarantee Western use of the maritime lines of transit in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, and
- to safeguard the state of Israel.

As we have seen, Washington has used a variety of means in its effort to attain its objectives. Diplomatically, it sought to build an interlocking web of

alliances to the south of the Soviet Union, but this effort has largely resulted in failure. Only Turkey and Pakistan seem to give serious thought to the idea of the Soviet Union as a major threat and, in the case of the latter, India figures as a more clear and present danger. The states of the Middle East are concerned with regional rivalries: Egypt versus Libya, Iran versus Iraq, Jordan versus Syria, Syria versus Iraq and virtually all against Israel. This interlocking web of mutual suspicion and hostility makes it highly improbable that Washington can achieve the "strategic consensus" necessary to forge a bulwark against the Soviet threat.

This is not to say that American diplomacy has been completely unsuccessful. The highpoint of Carter's diplomacy was the signing of the Camp David Accords, an agreement made possible because it addressed the security needs of both signatories. America has been able to improve its ties with the Arab states because of the Iranian threat to Gulf shipping. Washington's successes have thus been of a regional nature seemingly divorced from the bipolar competition between America and the Soviet Union.

In the purely military sphere, America's efforts have largely resulted in failure. Although successful in the Persian gulf, continuing U.S. Naval actions cannot help but revive lingering Arab fears of potential American hegemony. In Beirut, U.S. ground troops fell casualty to an enemy that played by its own rules; meaning no rules. Although the air strike of Libya inflicted heavy dam-

age on Qaddafi's imported hardware and damaged his domestic prestige, it did not end his control of the country. Libya continues to support terrorism.

Washington is attempting to achieve mutually contradictory goals in the Middle East. The threat of southward Soviet expansionism and preoccupation with superpower rivalries calls for a "strategic consensus" among Middle Eastern states, but overwhelming U.S. support of Israel alienates the very Arab states it wishes to draw into the alliance. Historically, American idealism has led Washington to reach for the optimal (and unobtainable) outcome of a united and peaceful Middle East squarely in the Western camp. Regional tensions and suspicions are likely to persist, and America has yet to come to terms with Arab nationalism and the all-embracing hold of Islam. The Arab States are unlikely to willingly enter any formal alliance with any outside powers. In each of the countries in question there are pressing demands for security, for economic development and for the respect due to sovereign nations. Genuinely impartial and balanced U.S. policies in the Middle East that recognize legitimate Arab as well as Israeli concerns hold the only true path toward peace in the region. America can achieve its vital strategic interests only by acting in the role of "honest broker." ★

Footnotes

1. John C. Campbell, "The Security Factor in U.S. Middle East Policy," *American-Arab Affairs*, Summer 1983, p. 1.

2. George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 82.

3. Fred J. Khouri, "The Challenge to U.S. Security and Middle East Policy," *American-Arab Affairs*, Summer 1983, p. 12.

4. Eldin G. Essam, "A New Game: Stabilization by Accentuated Destabilization," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientist*, February 1978, pp. 39-43.

5. Harry B. Ellis, "The Dilemma of Israel," *Interests in the Middle East Series* (Washington, D. C.: American Enterprise Institute, October 1970), p. 59.

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Writer's Award Nominee

In accordance with the guidelines for the *Military Intelligence* annual Writer's Award Program published in the January-March 1986 issue, the editorial staff is pleased to announce that Capt. Brian R.E. Miller's article, "Counterterrorism and Intelligence," will be the nominee for October, 1988. The winner of the 1988 Writer's Award will be announced in the April 1989 issue.