

THE STATE OF THE MIDDLE EAST, AND THE STATE OF MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

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The well-informed, frequently puzzled by foreign affairs, are sometimes even mystified by problems of the Middle East, an area of unusual volatility, controversy, and seeming unpredictability. Yet that area need not be less knowable than other regions. Actually, the Middle East may well prove to be more intelligible and predictable than most regions.

There are, I admit, some genuinely puzzling aspects to the Middle East—one is the military ascendancy of a small and reputedly unmartial people over vast masses of warlike people. But after several decades of unremitting hostility to Jewish political assertiveness in the Middle East, it is surely a suspension of rationality to suppose—as most of us seem to—that the atmosphere can be cleared by some semantic formulation. Is there a scheme that has not yet been dreamed up in the search for Arab acquiescence in Jewish statehood? Probably not, and yet we anxiously scan the newspapers for the hint of an Arab statement which would—incredibly, abruptly—change history and still the deepest yearnings of the Arab peoples, their incredible sense of outrage.

In the past, it was mainly the Zionists who assured us that Arab opposition to them was artificially stirred by feudal landlords. The Zionists, weak then, were greatly dependent on Western support, and such theories engendered sympathy for their work. Besides, they themselves believed their own fairytales. Now it is mainly the Arabs who are forced by sad circumstances to dissimulate readiness to accept the unacceptable. How else are they going to get us to restore their losses? As for ourselves, we are being consistently deluded, both because we wish to be and because others find it profitable to keep us that way.

The malaise goes deep. Professional students of the Middle East long ago abandoned us to the mercy of the propagandists—when they themselves did not join them. *La trahison des clercs*, if ever it happened, has taken place in this field. The intellectuals' great-

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est sin has been to allow their area of inquiry to degenerate into pure controversy, as if political reality cannot be ascertained by the usual methods of analysis but must be deduced on some 50:50 basis from the rhetoric of opposing spokesmen. Other events can be explored; in the Middle East, however, the prudent observer finds Truth by homogenesis or middlingness—presumably lying midway between the claims of antagonistic advocates. They will accuse each other of atrocities and deceptions, and we will deduce that they are equally guilty.

In the Middle Eastern conflict the confrontation involves extraordinarily unlike peoples and cultures. On the one side, society is centered on family and clan, with its honor and blood codes, male vanity, almost exclusively face-to-face relations and other traits of pre-industrialism; the culture balances a profound interpersonal distrust and free-floating hostility with rigid formalism and a massive resort to patterns of avoidance, ingratiation, dissimulation, and other mechanisms serving to hold down societal violence to levels compatible with communal survival. On the other side, individuals spend their lives, from cradle to grave, within large-scale organization frameworks (health systems, trade unions, factories, cooperatives) requiring extensive impersonal role-playing; the dominant values are ascetic and self-demanding (as opposed to profoundly self-indulging on the other side), almost puritan, and a culture devoid of estheticism, almost rudely functional. (Gracious stagnation versus rude dynamism is how some foreign observers have summed it up.) On the one hand, a system of universal male armament—with the weapon invariably the ultimate referent of manhood and self-esteem—excessive homicide rates and uncheckable compulsion toward martial posturing. On the other, normative restraints on the use of other-directed violence approach Scandinavian levels, while inwardly directed violence (suicide) is widespread, and a somber, almost self-conscious attitude toward martiality prevails. To say, under these circumstances, that the antagonists “hate” each other, or even that they together wage “war”—as if concept and behavior in these respects were even comparable—is clearly fatuous.

These unhappy misunderstandings are due in substantial measure to the existence of an establishmentarian political science, representing a version of Middle Eastern affairs produced by Protestant missionaries, pioneers in the American historical encounter with the Middle East. The Missionary Version parallels closely the one produced under the thirty-year-long directorship of Arnold Toynbee at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, which London University's Elie Kedourie has termed "the Chatham House Version." It is characterized by a cosmetic and apologetic approach to Islam—a curious development for Protestant evangelism. Having failed completely in its proselytizing efforts, it became ardently converted to its would-be clientele and in their behalf, as Kedourie put it, began proselytizing the West to "a picture of Islam as a strict unitarian version of Protestantism." Also reflecting the peculiar missionary experience is a denigration of the Ottoman phase of Middle East history—to which the missionary failure could be ascribed—and an idealization of the Arab strand in it—on which were pinned the hopes for an eventual vindication of the rather vast effort invested in the area by missionaries since 1820.

The resulting tendency has been to explain away shortcomings of Arab society by citing Ottoman rule and by presenting Arabs as victims of that rule, thereby masking the peculiar presumption to lordship over all others shared by (Sunni) Arabs with like Muslims under the Ottoman Caliphate. When the Arabs later named this same presumption "nationalism," it was celebrated as self-determination, and all other former Ottoman lands, except for the Turkish, were automatically relegated to Arab dominion. The subjection of Kurds, Berbers, Jews, non-Muslim Africans and others is thus "natural," however unpleasant the excesses. Subscribers to the Missionary Version greet the thought of Arabs subjected to Jewish dominion with a particular sense of immorality and of outrage. There is special resentment because of some theological difficulties with the idea of Jewish rule in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and this produces in some Protestant ecclesiastics a profound sense of personal and societal guilt for the existence of Israel—as if they (or their nations) and not the Jews themselves had established it.

The third basic tenet of the Missionary Version is an exuberant optimism concerning the modernization of Middle Eastern society, despite the record to date. This is bad enough when it misleads us. (In the 1950's, for instance, Israel passed its take-off point into industrialism and the Arab states made, at best, incremental gains on the pre-industrial level; the

conventional wisdom held precisely the opposite.) But it is far worse, even irresponsible, when it misleads the Arabs. For they, heirs to a great historic civilization, naturally enough resent being regarded as backward, and their highly rhetorical and self-indulgent approach to real change can only be furthered by such unduly congratulatory views abroad.

Having had the "field" all to themselves for nearly a century, the missionaries became entrenched both in ideology and in personnel as *the* American interest in the Middle East. Long before the U.S. had any strategic or political interests in the area, we were led to identify the desires of one special interest group as "American," distinct from a suspect "hyphenated" Americanism of another group. The distinction has lingered and has come to be regarded as natural. (When a writer on the Middle East is Jewish, a presumption of bias immediately exists; a missionary background is taken as expertise.)

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A small minority, the core consisting of several hundred families with Presbyterian or Congregationalist ecclesiastic and other missionary associations, colonized the commanding heights of American institutional concern with the Middle East, governmental and private. Even a cursory examination of the leadership of the State Department, Middle East Institute, Council on Foreign Relations, American Universities Field Staff, Middle East Studies Association, Institute of Current World Affairs, American Friends of the Middle East, etc., reveals a pattern of interlocking directorates, with the missionary syndrome as basic linkage. (A majority of the Board of Governors and chief editors of the Middle East Institute have associations with the State Department, and some have missionary experience—two are actually ordained Presbyterian ministers; an overwhelming number of the Governors fall into joint categories of ecclesiastics/diplomatists.) The nature of the Middle East establishment in the United States is reflected in the peculiar fact that the ranks of academics teaching Middle Eastern area studies are nearly one-half Arab. Although Jews are strongly represented in college teaching in general, and would be presumed to have a special interest in that particular field, the field itself is close to being *Judenrein*.

The official status of the Missionary Version has provoked the rise of a counter-version, no less fictional, spawned especially in the press by the self-conscious religious minority to whom the "American" version sounded rather like some insidious variant of anti-Semitism. Frankly adulatory of anything Israeli, the

counter-version is characterized by a tendency to underrate hard international political factors and to overrate the vulnerability of the Jewish state, thus endowing this revisionist literature with a certain hysterical innocence.

Serious students of the Middle East agree on a number of basic propositions which the above conditions have succeeded in obscuring from the wider public. Together, these propositions render the Middle East fairly intelligible to the literate person, even though many puzzles remain. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about these propositions is their denial of cherished beliefs.

The consensus of informed opinion is strongest on the point at which it conflicts most sharply with conventional wisdom. The possibility of peace between Arabs and Israelis, taken for granted in everyday discourse—official, editorial, and other—is regarded by most students of the problem with thorough disbelief. They understand that continued Jewish statehood is the absolute minimum acceptable to one side, and they strongly suspect that that exceeds what Arabs would find acceptable. Laymen are frequently misled by the esoteric manner in which this problem is handled by experts. Many thus confuse hortation with fact; writers who know better all too commonly argue that peace requires Arab acceptance—as if indeed that involved simply a “change of heart” or giving up some capricious position. Sometimes emphasis on the “irrationality” of the Arab rejection of Israel insinuates that a bit of reasoning will cure all. Many writers, following the Arab predilection for euphemizing unpleasantness, use code words which mislead the uninitiated. They will speak of Arab acceptance of Israel with some proviso (e.g., “justice for the Palestinians,” “becoming a Middle Eastern state,” “giving up racial exclusivity,” etc.), which invariably means terminating Jewish statehood. The layman thus reads that the Arabs will accept the Jewish state provided it ceases to be a Jewish state, but understands it to mean the very opposite. In one recent case, a scholar discussed the conflict quite conventionally, urging big power pressure on Israel for a settlement, withdrawal, etc., yet appended in the last paragraph the idea that real peace could come only if the *millet* system were revived, i.e., if the Jewish state were dismantled. Why scholars do such things is most certainly one of the least pleasant peculiarities of the Middle East field of study.

There is no question that laymen grossly underrate the sheer bitterness with which Arabs reject Israel.

Diplomats have sought to treat the conflict as an ordinary one capable of resolution by several decades of compromise, and they persist in doing so. They sometimes argue that the conflict simply *must* be settled, else disaster will strike us all. One can sympathize with the argument, but its logic is fallacious. The squaring of the circle does not become any more probable just because one becomes more frantic about it.

There exists some systematic study of Arab attitudes toward the Jewish state, providing certain guideposts for orientation and evaluation. One factor is that Arab hostility has multiple roots: the nature of Islam, the travails of modernization, the Jewishness of the foe, relations to the West, to name some major ones. This hostility varies along a number of vectors such as social class, time, geographic proximity, education, minority-majority status, identification with Arabism, etc. Thus, while opposition is not homogeneous, neither is it one-dimensional. The emphatic affirmation of, say, an Egyptian identity, at the expense of an Arab one, would indeed tend to reduce hostility to Jewish statehood but would not affect the other sources of hostility—a consideration usually overlooked by those who currently pin their hopes on “detaching” Egypt by means of Israeli concessions from the all-Arab compulsion. (As Sunni Muslims, Egyptians persist in feeling the Jewish state as an outrage.)

It is the consensus of analysts that pressures of modernization intensify rejection of Jewish statehood. There are thus forces at work, independent of *any* of the factors usually discussed in connection with a “settlement,” which tend to incline the Arab peoples toward rejection. Careful empirical surveys have disclosed a clear correlation between education, urbanism and secularization of individual identity with intensification of hostility to the Jewish state. There are several theories purporting to explain that connection. But regardless of their validity, the connection itself cannot be seriously doubted, and this bodes ill for any facile presumption of rapprochement.

A considerable gap between conventional discourse and informed opinion also exists concerning the role played by the international community in the Middle East conflict. Governed, as usual, by the narrow and immediate perspective, conventional wisdom holds that the United Nations and the big powers are the force and hope for peace. Amid such events as Big Four conferences, Security Council resolutions, the Secretary-General's interventions, etc., the Middle Easterners themselves easily appear as naughty, ir-

responsible children whom the worried and mature big powers must save from themselves to save all others. Sometimes these dealings are portrayed as transactions in courts of justice, in which some powers advocate the Arab brief, others the Israeli case, and some fair moderating conclusion can be imposed on the litigants as in municipal jurisprudence. Even if some are prepared to hold a more jaded view of the Soviet and, perhaps, even French roles in these dealings, they would hardly think of Anglo-American diplomacy in the same light, and certainly not of the United Nations'.

Such images have a good deal to do with our parochial prejudices, with pious hopes, with a number of popular fallacies about international politics, but not with reality. The words of Bernard Lewis of London University before the Subcommittee on National Security and International Affairs of the U.S. Senate deserve to be cited at some length in this connection:

Contrary to the general impression which prevails, the Arab-Israel dispute is not the main world issue in the Middle East. It is basically a local issue, a conflict between local interests. Left alone, the participants would no doubt eventually reach some *modus vivendi* and, even if they did not, it would not constitute a major menace to world peace. Neither side is capable of inflicting a mortal wound on the other. Without a settlement, the quarrel might smoulder on, like Cyprus or Kashmir, troublesome but not critical for the participants, and a minor nuisance to the rest of the world.

In the Middle East as elsewhere, it is not small power quarrels which inflame great power conflict, but rather the reverse. The major issue and the major threat in the Middle East is the encounter between the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union, to which perhaps China may soon be added. It is this global confrontation which affects and transforms local conflicts, otherwise trivial, making them both more difficult and more dangerous.

In this age of mass media, it has become common practice to see and even think in simplified images. Many of these are both false and dangerous.

One which enjoys great popularity is the legal or forensic image, in which the great powers are seen as participants in a law suit, sometimes as judges, sometimes as advocates, with Israel and the Arab states in the role of clients or litigants.

Both versions are inappropriate. The great powers are not sitting in judgment to administer the law or to dispense justice, but are there to protect and advance their own interests. All have basically this same purpose but pursue it with varying degrees of wisdom, decency, perseverance and ruthlessness. This fact is well known to the small powers.

The role of the great powers is not that of advocacy either. Great power negotiation is not a courtroom. There is no judge, little law and the adversary runs no risk of disbarment for breaking the rules. And as for the client, if at all, he is so

in the Roman not the modern sense of the word.

Forensic imagery, though attractive to lawyers accustomed to the contentious procedures of Anglo-Saxon law and to viewers weaned on television courtroom drama, is profoundly irrelevant.

Another such image derives from school and the nursery and depicts relations between powers in terms of big boys and small boys or teachers and pupils. The absurdity of this image of international relations is obvious once it is formulated. Large countries may possibly have wiser leaders than small countries, but this is not a necessary consequence of their size.

The direction of forces in the power arena is far from random; in fact, it is utterly predictable. Within the international community, the Arabs outweigh their foe to the point of crushing it in numbers, alliances, strategic resources, wealth, and other factors. The Arabs are highly desirable diplomatic agents. The Israelis are highly expendable—indeed, a negligible quantity. So extraordinary is this diplomatic disparity that it transcends completely even the ideological and cold war barriers in the world. Thus, aligned with the Arabs are India and also Pakistan; Spain and Greece but also Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union; the Vatican but also militantly anti-clerical Poland and Albania; Communist China but also Taiwan; the Common Market bloc but also the Warsaw Pact. It does not require much imagination to discover which of the sides in the Middle East conflict would urge big power and United Nations intervention, decision and imposition, and which would dread the very idea of this.

• As students of international politics well know, U.N. resolutions simply reflect power arrangements, and, given the facts of international politics, they obviously range only between moderately to extremely pro-Arab. It may offend sensibilities to say that this applies also to the much-cited November, 1967 Security Council Resolution, invariably presented as the ultimate in fairness and justice, but it is so. Like all previous big power interventions in Arab-Israeli wars, Resolution 242 demands, in essence, that the Arabs utter some words which may be taken to mean a "change of heart," in return for the restitution of their losses. (If implemented, Israeli withdrawal from Sinai would have been effected for the *third* time since 1948.)

The same asymmetry in international politics helps explain the invariable failure of foreign guarantees and other instrumentalities attached to Arab-Israeli settlements. It is axiomatic in international relations that guarantees, pledges or treaty obligations are only as good as the credibility of the sanctions behind

them. While it is possible to explain particular failings by special, *ad hoc* circumstances, the failure of all of them in the Middle East would seem basically rooted in the improbability of any foreign source undertaking punitive action for Israel against the Arabs, who are themselves capable of punishing that source severely and who are able to mobilize the United Nations and big powers against her. This is why the talk of still "more improved" international guarantees this time is to be taken with a great dose of skepticism.

The role of the United States is quite properly regarded by all as extraordinary, but the actual extent and nature of its deviation from the big power pattern in this conflict is at variance with popular opinion. The U.S. can be termed an "ally" or even just "supporter" of the Jewish state only with so much qualification as to undermine completely the utility of these conventional terms of reference. Like all other powers, the United States is oriented to the familiar asymmetry in international politics, but unlike them is inhibited by obvious domestic considerations, to which has been added a profound ambivalence because of the Soviet presence in the region. While not free of either generosity or hostility, the essential American-Israeli relationship has been rather basically a spiteful intimacy: If American interests are to be compromised because of Israel, America has felt entitled to recoup some of them at Israel's expense—an attitude frankly underlying the current American diplomatic initiatives. Indeed, the United States has been Israel's main foreign resource (not the best the U.S. can do in that capacity, but the best Israel could obtain in her considerable isolation in world politics). This was expressed in the aid by American Jewry, by governmental economic assistance, and politically by sometimes blunting the international harassment of the Jewish state, though not by positive support for Israel's own policies. But the U.S. has also been Israel's chief executioner. The nullification of Israeli military victories has, in the last resort, been forced by the United States in 1949, 1956, and is currently being sought as well.

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That the U.S. has already accepted pretty much the Arab idea of this, the third, settlement, is not veiled. Whatever confusion exists here is chiefly due to journalistic carelessness. The idea of a settlement of the 1967 war acceptable to the international community is essentially the Arab idea. Indeed, the Egyptian quarrel with the U.S. is not over substantive matters at all but precisely over the lingering failure of the U.S. to enforce upon Israel its own acceptance

of the Arab position of Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 armistice lines against Arab pledges and international guarantees (the Rogers Plan). The issue is not the terms but what diplomats call "delivering" Israel on already agreed terms—agreed to, in essence, by the United States and the Arabs, not Israel. The Arabs' efforts are geared to moving the U.S. in that direction by any means available: threats of war, big power confrontations, jeopardy to American commercial interests, etc.

Where there have been repeated attempts at rushing Israelis into such a settlement (the ceasefire-standstill violation episode of 1970; the Rogers campaign in the spring of 1971; the Sisco initiative later in that year), they have obviously been short-winded, or half-hearted, or both. There is wide agreement among students of the problem that the United States has so far refrained from serious attempts at coercing Israel and considerable speculation that it may never try, perhaps because it is doubtful whether the Israelis will this time give in at all. There is good reason to think that the United States has opted for a very gradual, piecemeal realization of its idea of settlement.

This does not rule out the possibility of new spastic attempts at full settlement, nor does it signify that the Israelis could be made to roll back to the old lines by patient salami-slicing tactics, except perhaps by massive military intervention from abroad. We are obviously dealing here with a crucial variable in any Middle Eastern equation, yet it is precisely here that almost all concerned have sinned by ignoring the real Israeli position—some because they thought it does not matter or does not deserve to be acknowledged, others because they have assumed that the United States speaks for Israel anyway. Aware students of Israel have long been impressed with its truculent pursuit of security and its profound distrust of foreign powers, including—if not especially—the United States. They have also been impressed with Israel's streak of desperate recklessness and have suspected that it would take on even the Soviet Union in direct intervention. Events have strongly borne out these propositions. These informed students have, throughout these many years and months of diplomatic activity, experienced an eerie feeling that fantasy passed for reality in the press, on the air, and in the halls of the United Nations. All over, a curious blend of *Realpolitik* and ancient prejudice made for the implicit assumption that the Jewish factor in all this is merely something to be acted on, not an actor itself. When dealing with a people bound to Samson and Masada and possessing nuclear capabilities, this may be a very unsafe assumption indeed.