

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend"

The Mideast: Figures in the Carpet

BY ROBERT K. OLSON

It is not a joking matter, but the state of Middle East politics is nothing if not absurd. Which is to say that, to the Westerner at least, the most recent rearrangement of alliances, conflicts, and rivalries follows no readily apparent pattern of loyalty or consistency—either religious or political. The Iran-Iraq war seems to have crystallized the fragmented Arab world into two opposing blocs, those siding with non-Arab Iran and those backing Saddam Hussein. But Libya and Syria, the two most pro-Soviet countries, have sided with anti-Communist, anti-Soviet Khomeini. On the other hand the Imam is opposed by the two anti-Soviet monarchies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia and the non-Communist Gulf states led by pro-Soviet Iraq. The two monarchies might be expected to oppose Iran's revolutionary regime but hardly to ally themselves with a regime no less revolutionary in its own way than Iran. Not to put too fine a point on it, it was the 1958 Iraq revolution that murdered King Faisal II, ruler of Iraq and cousin to King Hussein. We find Sunni Libya, which has sought to embarrass Alawite president of Syria Assad by stirring up opposition among the Sunni majority of Syria, united with Assad to give aid and comfort to the Shiite leader of Iran. Syria and Iraq, which are hostile to each other, are ruled by the two extant leaders of the Baath or Renaissance party dedicated to the unity of the Arab peoples. We find Soviet-client Iraq allied with the most pro-American states, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, against the most anti-American state, Iran. Soviet weaponry provides the security of the Arab axis against American weaponry provided to the shah. Meanwhile, Iran credits the U.S. with starting the war, even though Iran is being attacked with Soviet weaponry.

All Middle East countries profess to wish to avoid a confrontation or domination by the two great powers; yet the only pattern that seems to make sense is to divide the Middle East and its Eastern and Western flanks into those openly pro-Soviet and those traditionally pro-Western and anti-Soviet. The former includes Algeria, Libya, Syria, South Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The latter includes Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Iran. The pro-Soviets are pro-Khomeini and the anti-Soviets anti-

Khomeini, with Iraq the exception to the rule. All are anti-Israel, of course, except for Egypt. In short, as is usual in the Middle East, the "antis" provide the only apparent rationale for political life; it bears out the old proverb: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

It is no wonder, then, that the average person has trouble keeping up with the Middle East. It makes amateurs of us all. No self-effacing apology is necessary if the whole situation seems absurd. Indeed, it is the only reasonable conclusion to which we can come, with this qualification: that in the Middle East the absurd is normal, personality counts as much if not more than political principle, and the principles of Islam justify all.

The present situation, however, does require some appreciation of the fact that there are reasons why the Middle East is once again going through its periodic—usually ten to twelve years—cycle of turmoil. For it has suffered a series of disorienting shocks that would throw any balkanized world into confusion. Prior to the defection of President Sadat, stability in the Middle East resulted largely from the unshakability of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. In 1977, Sadat committed Egypt to the unthinkable, peace with Israel, pulling out the main power on the western flank. In 1979 the Iranian revolution eliminated the major power on the eastern flank. In 1980 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, and in September war broke out between Iraq and Iran.

These events shattered the always fragile stability of the region, opening the doors and windows to every fear, suppressed ambition, and hostility. Saddam Hussein wants to fulfill his ambitions for Iraq, thwarted by the shah, to be master of the Persian Gulf. For Libya, or rather for Qaddafi, already involved in a variety of schemes in Africa and the Middle East to promote the Islamic revolution and the status of Libya, the Iranian revolution opened a new opportunity. Saudi Arabia suddenly discovered itself standing alone, having lost its bulwark against Israel to the northwest and against the Soviet Union to the northeast. Some sort of realignment among regional powers was immediately necessary, and a new axis was formed by Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, with the Gulf states huddled beside it. But this left Syria, isolated by its fear of Iraq, to seek support from Libya and the Soviet Union and to remind the Arab world of its power and interests by whipping the PLO and Lebanon into line behind a challenge to Jordan. The politics of the neighborhood seems a better explanation than any.

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WESTERN INTERESTS

The problem for an outside power like the United States is to understand not just what is going on but how, in the riptides and eddies, the U.S. can stay on course to assure the safety of its own vital interests. But here again the absurdity surfaces at the very beginning, for no malevolent enemy could have devised a better way to hamstring an industrial country than to put the supply of its most vital resource, oil, at the mercy of a few unstable foreign powers.

Second, there is an apparent absurdity in alienating the very nations upon whom we are oil dependent by providing what Secretary Muskie called America's "irrevocable support" for Israel. To the Arabs, it is Israel, not the Soviet Union, that constitutes the principal threat to their security. Associated with it in their minds is the hypocrisy of a U.S. human rights policy that has not included the rights of Palestinians to self-determination. History resolves this apparent absurdity by reminding us that in 1948, in the wake of World War II and the revelations about the Holocaust, the establishment of Israel was seen as a great and good thing, overshadowing whatever consequences ensued for the Palestinians and Arab sentiments. Were the prospect to present itself for the first time today, the Jews would doubtless be given short shrift. Furthermore, even today the absurdity is only apparent: While the presence of Israel may be damaging to good relations with the Arabs, its absence would be a geo-strategic disaster. Were the United States to abandon Israel, it would almost certainly be replaced by a pro-Soviet Palestine. Palestine would provide the USSR with opportunities it now seeks through its recent treaty of friendship with Syria—naval and air base rights and domination of the eastern Mediterranean, neatly turning the southern flank of NATO. The demise of Israel would also most certainly involve the Middle East in a general and devastating intramural war, great power involvement, and a further threat to oil resources. Nevertheless, that is a Western view, and in the minds of the Arabs—which matters very much indeed—this aspect of U.S. policy is indefensible.

A third absurdity follows from the others. The consequence of turbulence in the Middle East, of the threat to the West's oil supply, of a stronger Soviet presence (Afghanistan), and of the nonresolution of the Palestine problem has been to divide the Western Alliance rather than to unite it in pursuit of common interests. This factor, generally overlooked by press, analysts trained in their regional specialties, and even by foreign offices, may, from our own point of view, be the most important of all considerations. It follows an established and ominous pattern. The Suez invasion of 1956 resulted in the worst split in the history of the Alliance, damaging relations beyond repair. In 1973 the U.S. and Europe fell out in the wake of the Arab oil embargo and a frantic European scramble for bilateral deals that discredited not only the Alliance but the European Community as well. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan first produced alarm, consternation, and close consultation. There then ensued months of increasing acrimony and squabbling over European support for a U.S. call for joint sanctions, for an Olympic boycott, and, with

regard to the hostages, sanctions against Iran and the breaking of diplomatic relations.

Our differences are basic and important. Europe has a larger stake in détente than the United States and does not want to prejudice détente by linking it to Soviet good behavior in the Third World, even in Afghanistan. Europe's dependence on the Middle East for oil is much greater than that of the U.S. Europe sees opportunities for trade, for better relations with the Arabs threatened by the "one-sided" pattern of U.S. support for Israel, and are actively working for a change. The consequence is a Europe no longer willing to let the U.S. play a solo game in the Middle East. It is all understandable, except that it weakens the Alliance upon which both European and American security ultimately depend.

U.S. POLICY: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Putting together a policy based on these three readily apparent interests, absurdities notwithstanding, would seem then to be a pretty straightforward affair. But, as with everything else involving the Middle East, there are no straight lines. Heretofore, U.S. policy has been monopolized by the Camp David process and its antecedents, a sort of go-for-broke effort heavily freighted with domestic political value. Camp David, in the words of U.S. negotiator Sol Linowitz, was "the only game in town." It has been promoted as the keystone to stabilizing the whole Middle East and to achieving a "comprehensive peace." As Israeli Major General Yariv observed in the December, 1980, *Worldview*: "For several decades the West has tended to view Mideast dynamics mainly through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict."

Since Afghanistan, however, the old containment policy represented by CENTO (the old Baghdad Pact) but now concentrated on the Gulf has been resurrected. It openly challenges the Camp David contention that a solution to the Palestinian issue will help to produce security in the Gulf. Some go further. What is more likely, they say, is that the insecurities of the Gulf and their influence on regional politics will have more to do with resolving the fate of the Palestinians than vice versa. In any case, Gulf security is now getting top priority.

The Reagan team is reported to be divided between the two views, the "Israelis" preferring a policy following the Carter lead of concentration on the Camp David process, the "Arabs" a policy centered on support of the Gulf. Standing in the wings, still too hot to touch, is the European proposal for including the Palestinians in the West Bank negotiations—a proposal, were the U.S. to adopt it, that might force an increasingly intransigent Israel to break off negotiations and which would certainly produce an outstanding domestic protest. Beyond that the style of the new administration seems to favor a go-it-alone approach toward the Middle East rather than coordination with its allies, based on the fact that the U.S. is the only outside power acceptable to both sides in the Arab-Israeli dispute and the only realistic counter to the Soviet threat to the Gulf.

But neither of the prospects—a continuation of the Camp David process or a unilateral military guarantee

of the Gulf—is very promising. The Camp David process is now stalled at stage two, the Palestinian autonomy agreement. The Arabs, Europe, Japan, and most other nations believe that the talks have failed and that a new plan must be found. World opinion is gradually coming around to the view that the Palestinians, even the PLO, should be brought into the negotiating process, thereby providing the talks with a credibility they now lack.

In the Gulf the U.S. is building up its position of strength. President Carter declared in his January, 1980, State of the Union address that the U.S. would oppose—by military force if necessary—any attempt by an “outside” power to gain control in the Persian Gulf. Two carrier battle groups and a marine amphibious unit are already deployed in the region. A Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) recently got a shakedown exercise in the Egyptian desert. Military base rights are being negotiated with Kenya, Oman, and Somalia. But whether all this can amount to more than a show of force and U.S. determination cannot be known. The nightmare prospect of a “liberation movement” in Iranian Azerbaijan or Baluchistan or of a left-wing takeover of the Iranian revolution seems to defy the use of force. The prospect of nuclear retaliation, even to protect oil supplies, is unthinkable.

It takes a healthy sense of reality to conclude that, the Carter Doctrine notwithstanding, the security of the supply of Middle East oil probably rests with the nations of the region themselves. Saudi Arabia, for example, has made it plain that it does not want a return to great power domination or confrontation, that the Arabs will defend themselves, if necessary, and only ask for the arms to do it. Given the current state of instability, it is not a very reassuring prospect. Soviet intentions have been clearly stated many times, but there does not seem to be any realistic alternative.

Whether one favors one approach or the other, Camp David or the Gulf, is no longer very much to the point. A new condition that must be met is the growing interaction between events in the Gulf and the Palestine issue—so much so that they can no longer be dealt with separately. An important dimension of U.S. policy, therefore, is to mesh the two policies into an integrated package. As now conceived, unfortunately, the two policies seriously conflict with each other. The Camp David process puts the U.S. at odds not only with the rest of the Arab world but, increasingly, with its own allies. Defense of the Gulf by way of providing arms to Saudi Arabia and to Jordan raises howls of protest from Israel, making it more intransigent than ever. The task of meshing the two policies, therefore, comes down to bringing them into a mutually supportive rather than a conflicting relation.

THE JORDANIAN OPTION

There is a glimmer of hope in what is increasingly referred to as the “Jordanian option.” Briefly, it means bringing Jordan into the negotiations, returning the West Bank (or the largest part of it) to Jordan, with bilateral security guarantees to Israel, and attempting the resettlement of the Palestinian diaspora—not on the already overcrowded West Bank but on the East Bank,

where settlement is needed.

The problems are manifold. The PLO, which was reconfirmed in its role as spokesman for the Palestinians at the fall Islamic summit in Amman, is unlikely to agree to a nonsovereign solution. Jordan could not touch it without the prior agreement of its neighbors or, at least, of Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The Palestinians would have to settle for half a loaf, receiving not a sovereign state but, as citizens of Jordan, a homeland. And it would require credible security guarantees for Israel.

On the other hand the “Jordanian option” has strong positive aspects. A general settlement between Israel and Jordan would provide more credible security to Israel than is now available through U.N. resolutions. In place of a weak “token” state on the West Bank that contained less than a third of the Palestinians, it would provide a homeland for all Palestinians, including those in camps and scattered throughout the Middle East. It could provide the context for coordinated development of the Jordan Valley, for resolving land and water rights disputes. Given the views of the Europeans, it would provide the possibility of a policy the West could unite behind. With regard to the Gulf, resolving the Palestine problem would enable Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to concentrate on their own security. U.S. military assistance would not then be seen as a threat to Israel but as security from “outside” interference.

Jordan is the key, and the key to Jordan is its own security. In the regional context this means the affirmation of at least Iraq and Saudi Arabia and, it would be hoped, Syria. The answer to the Palestine problem, therefore, if we accept the “Jordanian option,” lies in the Gulf with Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Conversely, the answer to security of the Gulf lies in a solution to the Palestine problem. By an interesting logic, the foci of contention, Palestine and Gulf oil, are, in fact, parts of the same equation and should be dealt with together.

For U.S. policy this presents the most promising prospect around. First, it integrates the two facets of policy into a single, mutually supporting exercise, no longer pitting the two against each other. Second, it also meets the problem of priorities—not as an “either/or” syndrome but as to timing. Strategists fear that the next two or three years will find the Soviet Union maximizing its temporary advantage before a Western response is mounted to stop it. The question of Palestine is bound to be slow and laborious unless, as some fear, an “incident” in 1981 dramatizes the issue. Third, it would bring U.S. policy toward the Palestinians into line with human rights policy. Fourth, it would turn responsibility for regional problems back to the Arabs themselves. The present U.S. commitment to direct involvement as a “full partner” makes it the scapegoat for every failure and absurdity, leads it to make promises it cannot fulfill, and carries political costs it can ill afford. The “Jordanian option” places the onus for nonachievement on the Arab world itself, which would have to face up to the truth of whether and to what extent it is willing to provide more than rhetorical support for the Palestinian cause. Finally, such a policy would help support three of America’s primary interests: Israeli security, access to oil, and coordination with its allies. 