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"Creeping Ambivalence in Arab Positions"

By Kenneth W. Stein

Embedded in the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the core question: are Arab states, the Palestinians, and Arabs in general willing to accept Israel in the middle of the Arab and Moslem heartland? And is the acceptance of a majority Jewish state permanent or merely temporary? You decide. In March 2002, in exchange for full Arab normalization with Israel, the Arab League stipulated that Israel should undertake "complete withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories," and attain "a just solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees... in accordance with the UN General Assembly Resolution 194." This 1948 resolution spoke about "[Palestinian] refugees wishing to return to their homes... [or receive] compensation for the property," if choosing not to return. Nabil Sha'th, the Palestine Authority's Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, said, as quoted in the Jerusalem Arabic newspaper al-Ayyam on February 3, 2001, that "it is now very necessary to talk of return plus compensation." Of course, any substantial return of Palestinian refugees to Israel, regardless of who pays, or how Israel is defined geographically, alters Israel's status as a Jewish state.

At the same time as the Arab summit issued its outline for a settlement with Israel, Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, spiritual leader of the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, in the London Arabic papers al-Majallah noted in late March 2002 that "all our Palestinian territories are the stage for our military action against this [Israel] enemy. We declare very clearly that Palestine from Al-Naqurah to Rafah and from [river] Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea is the land of Palestine. There is no harm in establishing a Palestinian state on any part that is liberated at this stage, but without this meaning conceding the remaining territories of Palestine. This is the difference between the brothers in the PA and us [in Hamas]."

A more liberal interpretation to how Israel should be geographically defined was provided by Mr. Hussein Ibish, the national communications director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. He said on Fox News on March 29, 2002, that the occupation which Israel needed to remove was that of "35 years." (Assumedly, he meant since the June 1967 war.)

Then there are examples of Arab personalities meeting with Israelis

and facing disapproval at home. I remember the November 1983 meeting that I organized for Jimmy Carter at our first event at the Carter Center. Our discussion was on the state of the peace process five years after Camp David. Invited to participate were academics and politicians from Syria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinians. We had to quash the Israeli television interview with a noted Syrian minister, lest he face condemnation or worse back home if the interview were broadcast. In private, he gladly met with Israeli academics.

Last year, a fine Lebanese journalist, Raghida Dergham, who represented a prestigious Beirut daily, Al-Hayat in New York for several years, whose reportedly indicted for high treason in her country because she attended a public Washington meeting and debated Uri Lubrani, Israel's former coordinator for Lebanon. It was reported that Dergham had her passport withdrawn and if she returned to Lebanon she faced immediate arrest.

My friend Professor Shafeeq Ghabra, a noted Kuwait political scientist and head of the Kuwait Information Office in Washington, recently participated in a debate with three Israelis at the World Economic Forum in New York City. His participation with Israel's former foreign minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami; its former ambassador to the United States, Itamar Rabinovich; and Avishay Braverman, president of Ben-Gurion University and moderated by an Egyptian, Abdel Monem Said Aly, director of al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, ignited a fiery discussion in Kuwait. The issue was: should Arabs be meeting Israelis in public. A group, the "Public Congress Opposing Normalization with the Zionist Entity in the Gulf," composed of mostly Islamists declared that Ghabra had committed "a despicable act... a crime under the law." It and a member of Kuwaiti Parliament requested that Ghabra's government punish him for his actions.

Eventually, large numbers of Kuwaitis rallied to support Ghabra, including one Kuwaiti Islamic group, which reportedly issued a statement saying, "a Muslim is allowed to debate even Sharon himself if the reason is to clarify the truth and our point of view."

Since Sadat's November 1977 visit to Israel, the Arab world had continuously debated the issue of Israel's presence and legitimacy. And still there is no clear conclusion, which would be the basis for evolving trust.

Yet Egypt and Jordan have peace treaties with Israel and so far, despite years of enormous stress and duress, Cairo and Amman have not tossed them aside. Cold relations with Israel, yes; broken relations,

no.

Take your choice: see the glass half-full or half-empty. Recall if you will, that from the 1940s through the early 1970s, however, the uniform Arab clarion call was something equivalent to "drive the Jews into the sea." Gone is that uniformity with whatever that implies about maturing attitudes.

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