

The Lebanese Debacle:



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHT

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The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making Progress Toward Peace ?

by Kenneth W. Stein

Violence in the West Bank and Gaza occasioned by the Palestinian intifadah and Israel's reaction leave the casual observer with a recurring sense of hopelessness. Incessant reporting of strikes, casualties, school closures, and arrests over the last eighteen months makes one ask, "Will it ever end?" The impression is that the violence will become more intense and the casualty rate will be higher. As if it has full control of the intifadah, the PLO says it will not allow the uprisings to end until there is Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza.

Considering the ideological commitment of Mr. Shamir and the inconsistent noises from the PLO leadership, a solution to conflict today seems improbable. Israel will not consent to Palestinian

elections in an atmosphere of violence, while the PLO is certain that Israeli-sponsored elections are meant to detract from the intifadah and to give prominence to an alternative Palestinian leadership.¹ Is there any reason to believe that a resolution of the conflict is any closer? A cursory glance would suggest not—in fact, perhaps absolutely not.

Yet when viewed in a broad historical perspective of more than a century, there is sufficient reason to believe that the conflict, with all of its complex variables and components, is somewhat closer toward the next negotiated settlement. During the last 100 years of the conflict waged over national identity, security, and individual preservation, very significant changes have nevertheless occurred to the primary actors and their supporters in the conflict. Negotiation and an exchange of territory for peace have taken place between Egypt and Israel; Jordan and Syria maintain a de facto peace with Israel. In addition, substantial changes in the essential elements of the conflict have occurred, suggesting that we are in a complicated but necessary peace-seeking phase of probing the other side's intentions before the peace-making and peace-keeping phases follow.

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¹Remarks by Abdullah Hurani, PLO Executive Committee member, Al-Anba (Kuwait), 3 April 1989.

Indeed, there is no guarantee that a logical and historical progression of events must follow in an obligatory fashion which will eventuate in another negotiated settlement in the conflict. Perhaps before the next negotiating plateau is reached, major leadership changes in the region are required; perhaps additional ideological alterations of strategic proportions will be necessary; or, perhaps another quarter of a century will be needed to implement and test what is negotiated. But the argument of this essay is that, while peace is far from imminent, we are closer to the next reluctant accommodation between sides in the conflict than daily events might have us believe.

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Though the nature and substance of the conflict have changed profoundly and give a sense of hope, some procedures, attitudes and issues inherent in the conflict remain. Fifty years ago, in February-March 1939, the first Middle East peace conference took place between Arabs and Jews at St. James Palace in London. Then, as now, a great power was the mediator. Then, as now, discussions with the mediator were carried out in the shadow of violence and unrest in Palestine.² Then, as now, each of the sides was more interested in persuading

²For a comparison of the political situation surrounding the violence of the intifadah and the 1936-1939 Arab revolt in Palestine see Kenneth W. Stein, "50 Years - On," *The Jerusalem Post*, 27 January 1988.

the great power about the merits of its cause than it was concerned about the legitimacy of its adversary.

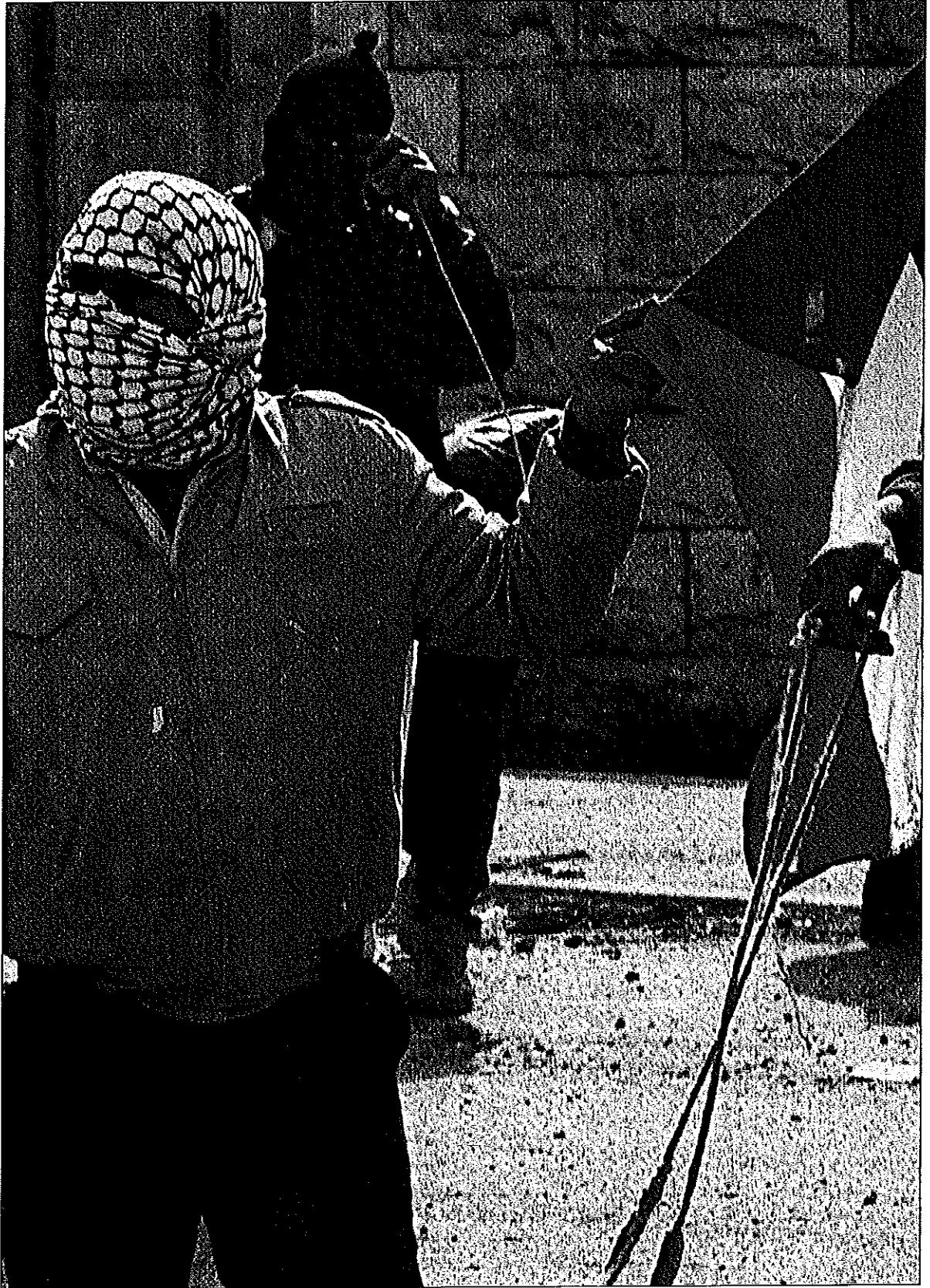
At the St. James conference, Egypt sought to play a conciliatory and intermediary role, yet overwhelmingly favored Palestinian aspirations. Meanwhile the Hashemites in Transjordan maintained very cool relations with the charismatic Palestinian leader. There was enormous controversy over who would represent the Palestinians. Then, as now, the Palestinians wanted the great power to pressure and persuade the Jewish community, while the Jewish community wanted direct negotiations and no outside pressure. Then, as now, there was discussion about the duration of a transitional period. The leading member of the Palestinian delegation, Jemal Husseini, said that "the end of the transitional period would never come as long as the Jews felt that they could delay independence."³ Chaim Weizmann, later Israel's first President, warned that if the British forced the Zionists to make political concessions, the Arab world would later support the Palestinian Arabs for further concessions from the Zionists.⁴

What followed from the St. James conference was the May, 1939, White Paper. It limited Jewish immigration and Jewish land purchase in Palestine while promising an independent unitary Palestinian state within ten years. But within the next decade Israel was established, many Palestinians became refugees, the Arab states took up the Palestine question as a major cause, the British mandate in Palestine came to an end, and the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis seemed totally insoluble.

Inherent in the Palestine Mandate, and of course in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, was Britain's notion of the "dual obligation." This unequal obligation called for the establishment of a Jewish national home but only sought to protect the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish (Arab) community in Palestine. Today, there is a reasonably secure Jewish state, while at the same time the Palestinian community is not interested in just satisfying its humanitarian needs, as outlined in U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967 which speaks of "a solution to the refugee problem."

³Remarks by Jemal Husseini, third meeting of the St. James Palace (London) Conference, 6 March 1939, Central Zionist Archives, Record Group S25/file 7638.

⁴Remarks of Chaim Weizmann in note of an interview with Prime Minister Chamberlain, 16 February 1939, CZA, S25/7642.



A view from the Palestinian intifadah

(MEI)

What are the five factors which give one reason to believe that we may be closer to another reluctant accommodation in the Arab-Israel conflict? First, the conflict has been "Palestinianized." Second, the Egyptian-Israeli relationship is no longer hostile but correct in an atmosphere of accommodation, if not embrace. Third, while Arab national agendas were once devoted to pan-Arabism, the restoration of Palestine, and the destruction or gradual demise of Israel, today other pressing national issues have forced the Palestine question to share priorities with critical individual and domestic needs. Fourth, old myths associated with the Arab-Israel conflict are dying; all sides to the conflict are more mature than a century ago and recognize that the other sides possess not only imperfections but even a degree of legitimacy. And fifth, the relationship of the superpowers has changed noticeably, making the conflict less polarized and somewhat less tense in the international sphere.

"Palestinianization" of the Conflict

The first reason why we may be at the beginning of a long end to the conflict is the significant change of focus from exclusive Arab state dominance and involvement in the conflict. While Palestinians were always part of the conflict's evolution, they have only recently become central to the conflict's solution. Palestinians have gone from pawn to participant in a little more than two decades. There are several components of the "Palestinianization" of the conflict which have occurred relatively recently: progressive Israeli recognition of Palestinian rights; increasing focus on a specific territory for the satisfaction of Palestinian aspirations; and a reassertion by the Palestinians that they must take control of determining their own future.

Most importantly, the Palestinian quest for political recognition has gradually achieved acknowledgement from Israelis. In 1971, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir asked, "Who are the Palestinians?" Seven years later, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed the Camp David accords accepting "legitimate rights of the Palestinian people." In 1986, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres called the Palestinian people a "nation." The most debated issue prior to the Israeli parliamentary elections in November, 1988, was the issue of occupied territories and the relationship of Israel to the Palestinian population.

After the June 1967 war, the focus of the conflict shifted from whether Israel would exist to a

concentration on its nature as a state and its borders as a nation. Increasing attention was given in the subsequent two decades to a territorial solution to Palestinian aspirations. Some equality was filtering into the original dual obligation. When signed in 1978, the Camp David accords lacked a trigger date to initiate Palestinian autonomy and whatever political outcome which might have flowed from it. Yet even with inadequacies, the Camp David accords directed attention to Palestinian control of the West Bank and Gaza as a territorial solution to the conflict.

Labor and Likud policy of settlements in the occupied territories amplified the West Bank and Gaza as zones of controversy for political embrace, physical control, and contentiousness. Ironically, former Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon's legacy to the Arab-Israel conflict was a reaffirmation of its Palestinian component. He helped destroy a conveniently autonomous PLO existence in Lebanon, forcing a focus on the West Bank and Gaza. Jordan's King Hussein focused on the same geographic areas as a means to resolve the territorial aspect of the Palestinian issue, lest Palestinian territorial aspirations be satisfied at the expense of the East Bank of the Jordan and, ultimately, Hashemite legitimacy.

Both the intifadah and King Hussein's July 1988 disengagement from the West Bank have concentrated attention on the West Bank and Gaza as the territorial solution to Palestinian political demands, despite some Palestinian and Israeli voices who see the Palestinian territorial settlement as either broader or located elsewhere.

During the 1970s and 1980s, when Israel came to accept legitimate Palestinian political rights, brutal treatment was accorded the Palestinians by many of the Arab countries. In the last decade particularly, while Palestinians were politically mollified with Arab vilification directed at Cairo's separate peace with Israel, their political status and physical existence in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan reached profound depths of disdain and personal punishment. Indeed, Israel crushed the PLO infrastructure in Lebanon; but Palestinians realized after the loss of Beirut that, if they wanted any political outcome to satisfy their aspirations, they had to assert themselves or continue to accept physical torment.

Egypt's departure from the inter-Arab system and the almost inconsequential nature of the Palestinian issue on the agenda at the Arab summit in Amman in November 1987 were two factors

which contributed immeasurably to a Palestinian recognition that their future would be determined more by their own actions than by the "goodwill" of Arab states. This self-assertion of Palestinian autonomy manifested itself in the spontaneous outbreak of the intifadah and the PLO's readiness to fill the political void left by Hussein's disengagement from the West Bank. Not only did the PLO catapult itself to center stage politically in its need to represent Palestinian interests, it also proclaimed an independent Palestinian state, recognized Israel parenthetically, and anointed Yasser Arafat as president-to-be of their state.

The Egyptian-Israeli Factor

Second, Egypt is no longer a confrontation state with Israel; the peace treaty reached its tenth anniversary in March 1989. Focus on the Palestinian component of the conflict could not have come from Israel until after a sufficient period of time passed, which allowed Israelis to be reasonably sure that the most powerful Arab state was almost permanently on the side lines strategically and militarily.

Ten years ago many in Israel and Egypt were skeptical of each other's real intentions. The mutual paranoia which had guided the Egyptian-Israeli relationship for the previous three decades was not suddenly neutralized by a ceremony on the White House lawn. Some of the same skepticism remains today. Israelis still want a relationship with Egypt like the United States enjoys with Canada. Egypt wants a quick and specific solution to Palestinian political aspirations, while the Israeli approach is slower and more ambiguous.

The peace treaty bent but it did not break, though more than a dozen events could have caused its collapse. These included application of Israeli law to the Golan Heights, annexation of east Jerusalem, the invasion of Lebanon twice, the destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor, the building of Israeli settlements, the bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis, the handling of the Palestinian uprising, the assassination of Anwar Sadat, the shooting of Israeli diplomats and tourists in Egypt, viciously anti-semitic articles and anti-Israeli political cartoons in some of the Egyptian press, and the Tabah controversy.

Israel still believes that no single Arab state or collective group of Arab states can hope to destroy Israel militarily without Egyptian involvement. Without Egypt's full engagement as a confrontation

state, missiles and chemical weapons could greatly harm Israel's population; but the most central and vital of Arab countries, Egypt, still remains steadfastly committed to its peaceful relationship with Israel. After his trip to Jerusalem in November, 1977, Sadat was a pariah in the inter-Arab system. Ten years later, Egypt has virtually restored diplomatic relations with each Arab state that had broken contacts with it and has done so without abrogating the peace treaty with Israel.

Fully returned to the Arab League as a full member, Egypt now participates regularly in all of the affiliated organizations of the Arab League, and its counsel is sought and its support is considered more genuine than that of Jordan or Syria in the PLO's quest to secure self-determination and an independent Palestinian state. Egypt is proof to Israelis who are so skeptical of Arab and Muslim intent that a Muslim Arab state can have a peace treaty with Israel and still maintain contact with its natural Muslim Arab orbit.

Upheaval in the Inter-Arab System

In broader terms, Egypt emphasized parochial and national interests over the Palestine question. Egypt's departure from an active front in the conflict spawned tremendous upheaval in the inter-Arab system. Focus was taken from the restoration of Palestine to the punishing of Egypt for selfish, national indulgence. But during Egypt's ten year absence from its central Arab position, other Arab capitals sought to enhance their own regional hegemony in the inter-Arab system and to take advantage of Egypt's departure as a major player in the inter-Arab system. Iraq failed at the northern end of the Gulf, Syria remains bogged down in Lebanon, and Libya did not overwhelm North Africa.

When compared to a decade ago, Egypt sees an Arab world today more regionally attuned and less satiated with petro-dollars. The Arab Maghreb Union, the Arab Cooperation Council, and the Gulf Cooperation Council were established to promote regional cooperation, share common security needs, and advance economic development. The Palestinian issue is not where it had been on the pan-Arab agenda before Egypt's temporary separation from Arab world politics.

It is, in fact, the maturation of the Arab world which has seen a correspondingly diminished attention for the Palestinian cause. It is not that Arab states are less interested, but that they just

have become more distracted by pressing issues of individual advancement, economic enhancement, and national security. In the last two decades while Palestinianization of the Arab-Israel conflict has taken place, higher levels of educational opportunity and achievement have focused Arab populations more toward personal wants and needs and less toward ideological commitments of a larger community.

The Palestinian "cause" has been somewhat of a casualty to both the social change in the region and

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The Middle East is undergoing the stresses of cultural and sociological transformation.

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to a resurgent Islamic identity among the youth, who are under-represented politically. Always indigenous to the area's political history and separate from the Arab-Israel conflict were the region's unique colonial heritage, patrimonial culture, social heterogeneity, rapid social change, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and porous frontiers. Once the conflict was no longer the only "cause" for Arab populations, these other components of the Middle Eastern landscape resurfaced to complicate governance.

Certainly in an involuntary manner, American culture has, as with other regions of the world, influenced the Middle East. Western and American value systems are directly transforming the mores and social behavior of the region's inhabitants at a prodigious rate. The unseen value exports include materialism, consumerism, secular beliefs, and the egalitarianism of the sexes and ethnic groups. Equally telling on Middle East societies is the change in attitude toward time and pace. Now there is an impatient reaction to the traditional slowness

of change, as much as to the nature of cultural change itself.

These intangible concepts are transforming regimes, accelerating people's expectations, and altering local political priorities of nation-states. They cause consternation to the holders of the political status quo, particularly as Washington emphasizes human rights and people's political participation in determining their own future. Once the Palestinians obtain self-determination, when will Syrians, Jordanians, Libyans, Saudis and other nationals of Middle East Arab states risk to ask, request, and demand changes in those political structures which reflect 19th century hierarchical notions of authority rather than 21st century democratic options guaranteeing a person's direct participation in his or her own future?

The Middle East is undergoing the stresses of cultural and sociological transformation. The region is financially and emotionally drained after eight years of the Gulf war. Oil prices remain at depressed levels and GNP growth is, at best, stalemated. Domestic infrastructures need attention in the fields of housing, electricity provision, sewage disposal, and other daily services.

Most Arab regimes face severe demographic pressures. Increasingly larger segments of the Middle East populations have advanced degrees, are under-employed, and are concentrated in major cities. Almost every nation or population group in the Middle East possesses a large ethnic or ideological minority; in some countries a minority rules the majority. The relationship between majority and minority, the ruler and the ruled require attention. Each nation is concerned with managing, co-opting, and negotiating with its citizens, who are imbued with more frequently recurring episodes of religious zeal. People's individual aspirations and appetite for political involvement are greater today than ever before. Authority patterns are under scrutiny, are sometimes being modified, or are susceptible to change. Structures of governance developed during the turn of the century in response to influences of Western presence have not had the chance to be reformed, revamped, or revolutionized. More frequently political leaders are seen as unresponsive, feared, aloof, anachronistic, and overly dependent upon ubiquitous security services.

What have new issues and crowded national agendas done to the Palestinian cause? There is a negative dynamism in the Arab world in general.⁵ There is also a skepticism—if not cynicism—among

populations within the region that politically induced solutions to outstanding problems will not be quick in coming. How long have the Palestinians been seeking a redress to their grievances? How long have Arab capitals been unwilling or unable to satisfy the Palestinian quest?

Not unexpectedly, therefore, there is some slippage in commitment to the Palestinian desire to restore Palestine to the Palestinians. Individual and national interests are more important. Egyptian President Sadat's trip to Jerusalem in 1977 was emblematic of that reality. Since 1983, the Syrian president has preferred to kill Palestinians than to negotiate with those whom he has ideologically opposed. In February, 1986, King Hussein rejected the PLO as a partner to negotiations with the Israelis, and in July, 1988, he challenged the PLO to take full responsibility to liberate Palestinian territory held by Israel.

In the political malaise and tragedy that is Lebanon, scarcely few Lebanese factions want a Palestinian presence in that strife-torn country. As compared to the period led by Nasser's Egypt thirty years ago, the Palestinian issue lacks the drama, vibrancy, and cement it once possessed. The Palestinian issue no longer has the emotional clout and the fearful capacity to bring down Arab regimes. Defense of the Palestinian issue does not bring people into the streets of Arab capitals to protest the meetings of Arab leaders with Israeli officials. Little clamor occurred when Moroccan King Hassan met with Israeli minister Peres in 1986 or when the meetings of Hussein and Peres were so publicly discussed after April, 1987.

Pragmatism on Both Sides

A fourth consideration of how the conflict has changed pertains to the reduction in political orthodoxy of both sides. Adherents to all sides of the conflict and their external supporters are more sophisticated and less ideological than they were twenty or forty years ago. Now each side sees the other as not totally illegitimate, as may have been the case just prior to the June 1967 war. Old myths associated with the Arab-Israel conflict are dying slowly. Whereas the conflict was once viewed as

our-side-right and your-side-wrong, a new centrist, though sometimes still parochial view is emerging and acknowledging a middle ground. For each side, joining the middle ground is difficult because long cherished beliefs require emendation. This change in political rigidity, in absolute commitment to one's cause and denial of the other's, continues to have a positive impact on options aimed at resolving the conflict.

The slow demise of old myths, or at least an effort at revisionism, has come about for basically two reasons: first, the literature on the conflict is changing; second, new generations emerging in the region have a different historical perspective about the nature of the conflict and of one another. During the last two decades, absolute and unilateral historical interpretations have yielded to analyses which reveal that both sides have warts, neither is perfect, and each has some measure of legitimacy.

There has been a proliferation of scholarship on the origins of Palestinian Arab nationalism, the emergence and development of Zionism, and the two or three year period on either side of Israel's creation in 1948. The opening of previously closed archival material has recast the Zionist-Jordanian-Palestinian triangle and the Syrian-Israeli relationship into a revised view. Each side bears more responsibility for the conflict's evolution than either would have admitted earlier. Total opposition to the Jewish state was less encompassing than first thought as individual Arab states sought to make their own quiet and separate peace arrangements with Israel. Israel was not totally faultless in the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem: some of it was due to outright Israeli coercion, as noted in Yitzhak Rabin's memoirs, and some of it was due to more than 100 years of social change which enveloped Palestinian society.

There is growing realization that neither side is totally right or completely wrong. Even the most philosophically committed have had to alter their own self-views and the image of the other side. In Israel, the 18-21 year olds serving in the permanent army are the generation born after the 1967 war and are two generations away from the holocaust and its searing impact upon the Israeli body politic. Palestinians who are currently leading the intifadah have seen their brethren crushed by Jordanian, Syrian, and various Lebanese militia. Among Palestinians and Israelis, a certain but amorphous psychological parity is developing which makes an accommodation more feasible, even though not yet likely. Palestinians are more assertive about control-

⁵I heard this term "negative dynamism" to describe the current state of affairs in the Arab world when it was used by Professor Said Eddin Ibrahim at the meeting of the Arab Thought Forum in Amman, Jordan in December, 1983.

ling their own future; Israelis are more adamant that their future be secured. Both seek to preserve their identity, and both want to participate in harvesting the fruits of the future.

U.S.—Soviet Cooperation

And fifth, there is a new atmosphere in the Soviet Union, which has an impact upon Washington and the Moscow-Washington relationship. Skepticism remains in the West about the duration and degree of substantive change inherent in glasnost and perestroika. But openness and restructuring of Soviet society are having a salutary effect on the Soviet-American relationship. A general reduction in superpower tensions is beginning to correspond to depolarization of tensions in such traditionally polarized regions of conflict as the Middle East. In 1988, Moscow and Washington helped steer a beginning to a negotiated settlement to the Gulf war and discussed a timetable for Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Although in both areas there were sufficient reasons for the conflict to wind down apart from superpower interest and concurrence, the new level of Soviet-American dialogue carried over into high-level diplomatic discussions in 1988 between Washington and Moscow about the content and method required to move the Arab-Israel conflict toward resolution. In addition, both superpowers have openly urged traditional allies to alter their absolutist views of the other side.

Equally important, each superpower has developed more mature, less confrontational, and more realistic assessments of the other superpower's traditional ally. Both Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's March, 1989, meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens in Cairo and the prior diplomatic openings by Moscow and her eastern European allies with Jerusalem have contributed to reduced Israeli anxiety about Soviet designs toward the Jewish state. Israel remains deeply obligated to increasing the opportunities for Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. Likewise, the United States opened a substantive dialogue with the PLO in December, 1988, a long-held tactical priority for the PLO. As much as two years ago, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev willingly told both Syrian President Hafez Assad and PLO leader Arafat that Moscow's (non-diplomatic) relations with Israel were unnatural and in need of change. Washington's willingness in early 1989 to criticize Israel publicly through the

State Department's annual Human Rights report for its management of the occupied territories is a mirror example of a superpower no longer identifying exclusively with just one side in the conflict. Both the Soviet Union and the United States have steadily developed a disciplined approach to non-traditional clients in the region. Undeniably this has had a salutary and depolarizing effect on the external environment which greatly influences positions taken by Arabs and Israelis in the conduct of the conflict.

The Diplomatic Process

Asserting that we are in the middle of a diplomatic phase is supported by a consensus that a format and method of negotiations exist. The primary guiding outline for a solution to the conflict is UN Resolution 242 of November, 1967. For some, it is too explicit while for others, it is woefully inadequate; yet it remains the basis upon which successful negotiations have taken place and upon which present discussions for future negotiations are based.

Whereas once the Arab-Israel conflict was a Jewish struggle for security and for acceptance from an overwhelmingly hostile Arab world, the conflict has come to focus on the sustenance of the Jewish state's security alongside the Palestinian struggle for national acceptance. As compared to fifty years ago, the issue today is not the existence of a Jewish state but within what boundaries? How and in what time-frame will the Palestinians be provided political rights?

It is not impossible that, during the next two or three decades, a Syrian-Israeli non-belligerency agreement could be signed, a transitional arrangement for a portion of the occupied territories could be underway, some demarcation could be made between political, security, and economic borders affecting the occupied territories, and Jordan and Israel might be prepared to sign an understanding to determine the nature of their future relationship. The Arab-Israel conflict has journeyed a long way since the 1880s, since the St. James Palace conference, and since Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. Despite the nightly news, not all that has transpired in the Arab-Israel conflict has been negative, if an equitable political solution is the desired outcome. The "dual obligation" is in the process of being equalized. ■