United Nations Techniques in the Middle East

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This paper was prepared less than a year after the 1967 Arab-Israel war and more than two years before the UN again became active in the Middle East with the cease-fire proposal of 1970.

The first international peace force in history was created by the United Nations (UN) at the time of the Suez crisis. At the outset, it was the subject of scorn by academicians. Julius Stone wrote in his book, *Aggression and World Order,* that he could not see any role for international forces short of combat service. Possibly, too, politicians were secretly scornful of the potentialities of the UN emergency force, seeing it as a mock police organization created to replace the so-called Anglo-French "police force" that had seized the Northern half of the Suez Canal. It was thought that after a display of symbolic utility, the UN force could evaporate as quickly as it had materialized.

The history of the UN force nevertheless seemed to have changed world thinking about international peace-keeping, and the author of the plan, Canada's Lester Pearson, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his efforts. In time, the peace force idea was applied again by the UN in the Congo, Indonesia, and Cyprus, engendering confidence in UN peace forces based on what was considered successful completion of the missions. This confidence is based on little else, however. There is a mythology of peacekeeping that envisages a courageous UN soldier rushing out between enemy lines, waving the UN flag and shouting to the combatants to stop fighting. Alas, the possibility for this kind of action is almost nil. UN soldiers would, in most cases, be prevented by one side or another from entering a combat zone.

To understand international policing, it is necessary to survey the actual events in which it operated, and it is particularly revealing to see the technique unfold in the context of the environment in which it was first pragmatically evolved: that is to say, in Palestine.

International peacekeeping techniques had practically no antecedent when in 1948, after the British withdrew from Palestine, the UN created its first peace agency for the area, the Truce Commission. Working under a directive from the Security Council, members of the commission had tried to go between the warring Arabs and Jews to promote a truce. News dispatches reported that one member lost two cars in that too dangerous game, and Thomas Wasson, an American, was shot to death by a sniper while returning home from a meeting of the Commission. He was the first to lose his life in UN service—but the effort for a truce was fruitless.

The Security Council obtained a one-month truce in May, 1948; and one foundation of that truce, as reported

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by Count Folke Bernadotte and by the Security Council, was Arab acceptance of a freeze on Israel's importation of men and arms as a condition for stopping the Arab attack. This freeze was monitored by a neutral UN military group numbering about 1,000 (counting the crews of patrol ships and planes). Allegations of Israeli infringement, especially false allegations, could be prevented from spiraling into new fighting by this monitoring, but the system could have broken down had some party methodically ignored the freeze on men and material. At least the UN was preventing a breakdown over imagined or distorted violations.

The second Palestine truce ordered by the Security Council in July, 1948, was different. A strongly-worded resolution, it was to be permanent, amounting to an end to the war. Both sides now moved to consolidate their positions, making it difficult for the UN peacekeeping personnel to make any contribution. UN personnel could only protest as thousands of Arabs were forced to leave their villages in Israeli-controlled territory and seek refuge in Transjordan. They could only protest as Arab gunners made the Jerusalem road so dangerous for Israeli supply convoys that it had to be abandoned and replaced by a road exclusively within Israeli-controlled territory.

What brought international diplomatic pressure for an armistice at the end of 1948 was the major fighting in the Negev. With the futility characteristic of the second truce, the UN personnel could not get the Egyptians to allow Israeli supply convoys bound for Jewish settlements in the Negev to go across the Egyptian lines, as required by the terms of truce. So the Israelis opened their own way by means of an attack that pushed Egyptian forces back into Sinai.

UN personnel did have some value in this end game, and Israeli-Lebanese fighting in Western Galilee at about the same time is a classic case. Each side blamed the other for starting the fight, and each side said it wanted to stop fighting but refused to do so unless the other side did. Only the UN, with personnel on both sides of the front, could talk with both and arrive at cease-fire terms acceptable to them.

Armistice agreements were signed in 1949, and a new day of effective operation had dawned for the UN peacekeeping personnel. But by 1951, a long-term problem had emerged. Was the armistice agreement permanent? The Israelis said no; it was just a transitional arrangement looking toward a final peace treaty. The Arab governments rejected this thesis and insisted year after year on their rights under the armistice agreements. At first the UN peacekeeping personnel coped with the issue by urging the Israelis to prolong their observance of the armistice. For example, when in 1951, the Israeli moved Arab farmers from a strip of land over which they (the

Israelis) thought they had acquired full sovereignty, UN officers supervised the return of the Arabs to their land. In effect, the personnel had been instrumental in denaturing this feud over land as noted by Jacob Hurewitz (1951),

Beginning in 1953 the Israeli's embarked on a policy of raiding Arab nations, partly to even the score for acts of violence and larceny in Israel by Arab infiltrators and partly to prod the Arab governments into negotiating a final settlement, according to Walter Eytan's account (1958). The presence of UN officers set this policy off its timetable, because a UN investigation of the first serious raid established that it had been perpetrated by Israeli government forces, not by vengeful Israeli civilians, and the atrocities had been committed. World opinion was shocked, and the Security Council censured Israel. Moderates were then elevated to top positions of power in Israel; but, since Arab infiltration continued, the policy of raiding was resumed by Israel in 1955. After this, the UN Chief of Staff, E.L.M. Burns, wrote: "I had the feeling I was trying to stop a runaway truck on a steep hill by throwing stones under its wheels." The Egyptian *fedayeen* raids and the large scale introduction of Soviet arms into Egypt added fuel to the fire, and the Israeli attack on Egypt in 1956 was the result.

Even before that outbreak, several political leaders like Adlai Stevenson and Eleanor Roosevelt had proposed that one cause of Middle Eastern tension be removed by erecting a barrier to infiltration across the borders of Israel. That seemed to be the best measure available, once the war had occurred, and minds were turned to the problem of preventing any repetition. The presence of the Anglo-French "police force" that had come to the Suez Canal area purportedly to protect it from the Israelis provided an ideal excuse for a UN force to take its place.

In basic concept the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) was an *intelligent barrier*. At first it was a barrier between Egyptian and withdrawing Anglo-French forces capable of keeping the sides from shooting at one another. It also was able to clear allied mines from the path of the oncoming Egyptian army. Then UNEF became a barrier between the Egyptian army and the allied forces embarking at Port Said, intelligent enough to direct traffic, keep civil peace and protect public utilities. Still later it was a barrier between Egyptian forces and Israeli forces withdrawing across the Sinai desert.

Ultimately UNEF became a barrier against infiltration between Egypt and Israel along their common frontier, a job earlier UN peacekeeping units had been incapable of doing. Like the older UN units, UNEF worked to denature small incidents, but to UNEF this counter-aggravation work was an everyday, round-the-clock activity in which the force had to succeed several times every day in separate incidents or not succeed at all. Along most of the Israeli-Egyptian frontier, the old Palestine-Egypt border, there was little chance of friction. The once-a-day jeep patrol along this line was a task requiring more fortitude than attentiveness. Throughout UNEF's decade the Yugoslavian battalion insisted on keeping this oneorus sector of the line as an on-going proof of their indefatiga-

bility. A good share of their reports of violations were crossings at one point on the line where Israeli military personnel and tourists stepped across to get an exceptionally good view of the Gulf of Aqaba, not visible from the Israeli side. UNEF occcassionally stepped in to warn the Israelis they were violating the line, doing this once just moments before an Egyptian patrol appeared and prepared for a fight, according to the UNEF daily log.

The serious threat of infiltration was not here but along the Gaza Strip. In December, 1948, the Israelis had been unable to take the city of Gaza, thus leaving in Arab hands a fertile strip on the Palestine coast adjacent to Egypt. Into that small area about half a million human beings were to be concentrated for two decades, most of them as refugees from elsewhere. In the action and retaliation that triggered the 1956 war, the population pressure in Gaza was an important part of the overall tension. The Arab settlements were ideal targets for raids and artillery bombardments, and the teeming Arab population took vengeance into their own hands. Israel claimed that it was Arab infiltration that provoked its raids on the Gaza Strip. The UN saw that if infiltration could be stopped, a pretext for the resumption of serious action could be eliminated.

A desire for peace on both sides was fundamental to the success on UNEF. The Israelis at first were reported to have patrolled too close to the line and, on occassion, to have crossed into the Gaza Strip. But in time they came to trust the capability of UNEF to patrol the line. The UN Secretary-General pointed out that at no time did the Israelis give UNEF active cooperation or let them onto Israeli soil, but they did pull Israeli forces away from the line to give UNEF a freer hand. The Arab side was usually cooperative throughout UNEF's history, a fact that Israeli propagandists portrayed as Egypt hiding behind the UN's skirts. UNEF activity was confined to a carefully marked zone of 500 meters adjacent to the frontier in which arms were forbidden, and the growing array of Arab military installations had to stay back of that line. It was a difficult line; and any unauthorized person who crossed the UNEF zone into the zone patrolled by the local military organization was certain of instant apprehension in daylight and stood a good chance of being greeted by bullets, not handcuffs. Moreover, the Arab soldiers frequently violated the UNEF zone, sometimes in pursuit of an infiltrator they thought UNEF had not seen and sometimes just to irritate UNEF.

The fifty meters closest to Israel were UNEF's own. UNEF issued passes to Arabs who had to work agricultural land in that belt, but it apprehended all others found there. Persons who wandered in from Arab side were told to go back, but Arabs attempting to cross the Israeli line or who crossed it and returned to the UNEF zone were apprehended by UNEF. These and any Israelis who crossed the line had to be handed over to the Egyptian authorities for trial and punishment.

There were three ways UNEF could be outmaneuvered. First, surveillance at night was poor. The Swedish UN troops had success with dogs at night, but they

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caused an unfavorable public reaction. Second, Arab infiltrators going into Israel could be stopped only in the UNEF zone and could not be pursued into Israel by the UNEF. Third, UNEF observer posts and patrols were thinly manned, so any group that outnumbered them was bound to get some or all of its members through the UN zone and across the line. The only way UN reinforcements could be brought up was by means of notification of a standby patrol, and that took time. If an infiltrator struggled out of the grasp of a UNEF officer, he could not be gunned down as he fled. UNEF weapons could be used only in self-defense, and holding an infiltrator did not count as self-defense. But UNEF personnel were conspicuously armed with ready sten guns, and the fact that they had cut down a number of would-be assailants with their guns in the early days of the force created a healthy respect for UNEF, we were told by E.L.M. Burns.

The classic situation UNEF was working to avoid was the crossing of the line by an amateur infiltrator, innocently or maliciously, and his getting hurt or hurting someone on the other side, thus setting off a chain reaction of revenge that could escalate into a new war. As UNEF's number dwindled from its maximum of 6,000 men in 1956 to a little more than half that number in 1967, its members had to be worked overly hard to keep the line under continuous surveillance.

Just before the Middle Eastern war of 1967 broke out, the frontier was the quietest it had ever been. Yet during the two months immediately preceding the outbreak, there were still only four days during which no incidents had been handled by UNEF.

In late 1966 and early 1967 there were reports of crossings into Gaza by Israeli youths fleeing Israeli unemployment or the draft, and who refused to be repatriated to Israel. Normally, UNEF apprehended them as they came across and handed them over to the Egyptian liaison officer. In one case reported by the UN, an 18-year-old from Israel penetrated 470 meters of the 500 meter UNEF patrol zone. Within a few steps he would have been at the mercy of the Palestine Liberation Army of Arab guerrillas, but UNEF caught him.

Another type of problem was caused by large groups of Arabs who crossed the line to reap Israeli crops and expected afterwards to return to their own side. They feared that tangling with UNEF would mean a jail sentence, so they would make a run for it back into Gaza when UNEF patrols appeared. What was UNEF to do? It might cause the jailing of thirty breadwinners at a time. Or, worse yet, the Arabs might decide to stay on the Israeli side and get into trouble there. UNEF seemed to handle this problem by frightening the groups back into Gaza and seizing one or two persons as examples. Single Arab infiltrators were caught regularly by UNEF, but sometimes it was on their *homebound* crossing after having done their damage.

UNEF's most sensitive problem was to prevent direct conflict between Israeli and Arab forces, and tense situations presented themselves from time to time. Split-second timing by UNEF was vital for a peaceful result.

In May, 1965, for instance, an Israeli patrol took up a position on their side of the line and a Palestine Liberation Army patrol appeared on the other side, inside the UNEF zone. UNEF immediately interposed, facing down the barrels of the Arab guns and backing the patrol out of the zone. In October of that year, when twenty-five Israelis had penetrated two kilometers into Egypt, Egyptian forces to the rear of UNEF opened up on them from long range. When the Israelis responded to a UNEF order to turn around, they were still fired upon as they retreated. Had UNEF not been there, the shooting might have been more serious. When Arab military personnel reckoned that UNEF had failed to spot an Israeli infiltrator, they moved into the UNEF zone illegally themselves. Often it became a race to see if UNEF could interpose itself between the two hostile parties before they met within the UNEF zone.

In order to forestall confrontations, UNEF would do almost anything. Once when an Israeli patrol vehicle got stuck in the sand on its own patrol road, UNEF crossed the line to help push it out so as to avoid tempting Arabs to shoot at the apparently helpless vehicle. Normally, UNEF maintained rigid discipline in refusing to have relations of any sort with Israelis.

Although it teetered on the edge of breakdown every day for a decade, the peace along the armistice line was, in fact, maintained by the overworked and often abused UNEF. The war of 1967 was in no way related to conditions along this line. UNEF had done its job. Its capability for interposition between enemy units and for discouraging and apprehending infiltrators was reliable.

At the time it was relieved of its function by the Egyptian government in May, 1967, there was no possibility that UNEF might protest and stand fast, expecting to interpose between enemy units that had been ordered into battle. UNEF was set up to pacify a difficult frontier between nations practically at peace, and all of its techniques and its abilities relied on this peaceful framework. Once war was invoked, their role vanished; and their withdrawal became simply a question of protecting the lives of the members of UNEF. Unfortunately, when the time for withdrawal came, the improvisations of the moment did not succeed in saving the lives of all of UNEF, most of whom were still in Gaza when the June war swept over them.

By the time UNEF was terminated, the UN had invented and practiced in the Middle East all of its various peacekeeping techniques, with the main exception of the combat techniques applied in the Congo. In general, these techniques resulted in the delay of hostilities. Without UN supervision of Israeli reinforcements during the first truce in 1948, the truce might have broken down almost immediately. The kind of international action triggered by UN observer reports on truce violations had an important dampening effect on the raiding and recrudescence of violence in the Middle East after 1949. The character of these raids might otherwise have been so obfuscated by propaganda that the Great Powers might not have felt able to take a stand. And the Arab-Israeli war of 1956 might have occurred, say, two years earlier. The war of

1967 grew out of what were at first minor clashes along the Israeli-Syrian border. It was UNEF that prevented such clashes from occurring on the Israeli-Egyptian line, and had there been a similar force on the Syrian border, the 1967 war might have been delayed. And the *delaying* and *averting* of hostilities are more similar in practice than they are in concept, because for some unforeseen reason a delayed war may never occur.

There is no grand or obvious rationale for the 1967 war. In it the Arabs lost assets while the Israelis gained liabilities: the Arabs lost land it would be hard for Israel to hold. Neither side found itself is an improved military position regarding the other. If, in fact, some *minor* truce violation or some equally irrational source of the carnage could be identified, the 1967 war would serve to underscore the value of the diligent efforts of the UN to suppress *minor* causes. The war does not show the UN efforts to have been useless—only inadequate.

Though small in number and power, the UN personnel had a bearing on the peace because of the special situations in which they found themselves: being able to watch contraband, to communicate with both sides to get ceasefire agreements, to fix blame impartially and to catch infiltrators. Looked at in isolation, these services are not impressive; but, looked at in the context of what was needed, the peace would have been as surely lost without *them* as the poetic kingdom would have been lost for want of a horseshoe nail. But will UN policing ever again reach the proportions of UNEF? Until the Israelis withdraw from their newly won Arab lands, the front between the two sides will be too volatile to permit UN policing. But after a relaxation of tension in the area, there may be police work for the UN.

Notes

1. *New York Times*, May 22 and 23, 1948.
2. Count Folke Bernadotte, *To Jerusalem* (London: Hodder and Sloughton, 1951); and UN, Security Council, *Official Records, Supplement for June 1948*, pp. 79-81.
3. UN, Security Council, *Official Records, Supplement for November 1948*.
4. Incidents confronting UNEF are described on the basis of the "Daily Log," the daily operations reports of UNEF.

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