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THE PALESTINE CONFLICT AND US STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE PERSIAN GULF

by

EMILE A. NAKHLEH

Two opposing arguments have been advanced concerning the impact of the Palestinian conflict on American strategic interests in the Persian Gulf. The first maintains that the Arab and Islamic states of the Gulf area view the Palestinian question as central to peace and stability in the area. They have avoided being closely identified with the United States because of its continued support of Israel and Israeli occupation of Arab lands, including East Jerusalem. Leaders of Persian Gulf countries have often stated that if there is to be regional peace and stability, the Palestinian conflict, including the question of Jerusalem, must be resolved. As long as the conflict continues, according to this argument, the United States cannot expect to gain the cooperation and good will of the countries of the region, meaning that American strategic interests will remain in jeopardy.¹

In contrast, the second argument holds that Gulf instability is endemic; that Gulf oil policies are to a large extent economic, not political; that Gulf regimes are intrinsically fragile, with serious gaps between the rulers and the people; and that oil wealth and concomitant modernization have created new socio-cultural-religious pressures in most Gulf societies which are potentially threatening to internal stability and external security. Underlying this argument are the assumptions that the Palestinian question is basically tangential to US strategic interests in the Persian Gulf; that, with or without a

solution, regional stability will always be problematic; and that most of the primary factors contributing to this instability emanate from within the Gulf itself.²

This article, after addressing the arguments above, will draw certain conclusions regarding American strategic interests in the Gulf. Because the region has occupied an important position in Washington's foreign policy since World War II, it will be useful to begin with a review of some of the major presidential statements on foreign policy and their applicability to this area.

PRESIDENTIAL DOCTRINES

American presidents since Harry S. Truman have concerned themselves with the relevance of the Middle East to American and Western interests. Three primary factors are responsible for the Middle East's paramount position in US foreign policy: Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the Palestinian problem; oil and Persian Gulf security; and the area's proximity to the Soviet Union, with its history of attempts, overt and covert, to establish a foothold in countries throughout the region.

The Soviet Union has succeeded in signing friendship treaties with a number of Middle Eastern countries, most of which have since been voided, terminated, or ignored. Recently the Soviets have become a major actor in the region, with a surrogate presence

in South Yemen, along with the Cubans and East Germans, and a large occupying army in Afghanistan. While Syria has thus far remained in the Soviet orbit, Iraq has begun to assert independence of its large northern neighbor's hegemony.

The Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf continue to be volatile, and such eruptions into open warfare as the Iraq-Iran conflict could have awesome consequences for the United States and the entire Western industrialized world. While Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq are all searching for new roles for themselves in the region, they remain a major source of oil for the West, with Saudi Arabia and potentially Iraq having the lion's share.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been reduced to its seething core: the question of a Palestinian state. Since the mid-Seventies, the politics of Palestine have dominated those of the Arabs and thus those of the Gulf. The politics of Palestine and the politics of oil have also become linked in the minds of most American foreign policymakers. American strategic requirements in the Gulf can best be met by providing military support to Gulf states; states which can comfortably accept such support—with its anti-Soviet implications—only if the Palestinian conflict is resolved.

American concern for Third World stability and the possibility of Soviet threats in that world have contributed to several major policy statements on the part of US presidents that impinge at least partially on the Mideast: the Truman doctrine (12 March 1947); the Eisenhower doctrine (5 January 1957); the Nixon doctrine (18 February 1970); and the Carter doctrine (23 January 1980). All except Nixon's focused directly on communist threats to states and established regimes in the area. All committed the United States to respond directly or through local states if any threat, presumably communist, were to arise or if the United States were invited by any state in the area to intervene. Whereas the Truman, Eisenhower, and Carter doctrines prescribed a direct US involvement, the Nixon doctrine called for action by local states using American

weapons but not American soldiers. Under the banner of "Peace through partnership," its operative principles were partnership, strength, and willingness to negotiate. The presidential statements below synopsise the four doctrines:

- President Truman, describing the American response to communist aggression in Greece and Turkey in 1947:

It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. We must assist free peoples to work out their destinies in their own way. Our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.³

- President Eisenhower, announcing US measures to meet the communist threat to Middle Eastern countries in 1957:

[The United States will] cooperate with and assist any nation or group of nations in the Middle East in the development of economic strength dedicated to the maintenance of national independence . . . [and] undertake in the same region programs of military assistance and cooperation with any nation or group of nations which desires such aid. [These steps may] include the employment of armed forces of the United States to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations requesting such aid against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international communism.⁴

- President Nixon, defining the limits of American power and the American commitment to help other nations in 1970:

The United States will participate in the defense and development of allies and friends, but . . . America cannot—and will not—conceive *all* the plans, design *all* the programs, execute *all* the decisions and undertake *all* the defense of the free nations of the world. We will help where it makes a

real difference and is considered in our interest.⁵

• President Carter, announcing US policy in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979:

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.⁶

These important presidential policy statements show a consistent American perception that the Middle East is vital to US national interests, that stability in the area is essential, and that the United States would be prepared to act in case of a threat to that stability. The Truman doctrine was implemented successfully in Greece and Turkey through United States economic and military aid. The Eisenhower doctrine was never implemented, primarily because no Middle Eastern country ever called on the United States to invoke it. The Nixon doctrine's application in the Middle East was well illustrated in Washington's support of the Shah as the policeman of the Gulf. However, the Iranian Islamic revolution leading to the collapse of the Shah, the increasing American dependence on Gulf oil, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have convinced American policymakers that defense by proxy is unreliable, and that to protect its strategic interests in the Gulf the United States might become involved directly. This direct involvement is the cornerstone of the Carter doctrine.

It is interesting that from 1947 to 1980, successive American presidents felt a need to redefine the precise area which they perceived as vital to American national security and strategic interests. President Truman's message applied to Greece and Turkey, two non-Arab states. President Eisenhower's message applied mainly to the Fertile Crescent states, particularly those which saw a threat to themselves in the rising tide of

Nasser's Arab nationalism. President Nixon shifted the focus from the Fertile Crescent to the Persian Gulf, a change dramatically reinforced by President Carter.

In the Fifties and Sixties, the matter of the Arab-Israeli conflict was essentially confined to Israel and the Arab states themselves; whenever the conflict erupted into open warfare, Israel won. Palestinian nationalism was dormant; oil was available in unlimited quantities at low prices; and oil policy was mainly determined by the large international oil companies—the Seven Sisters—not by the oil-producing countries. The Seventies witnessed a sharp volte-face: Palestinian nationalism emerged as an international factor; oil became a political weapon; oil companies were replaced as policymakers by the producing states through OPEC; the continued availability of oil to the industrial world at reasonable prices became problematic; and insistence upon a forced settlement with Israel emerged. Washington advanced several specific policy objectives to fit the changing circumstances:

- The security of Israel.
- A comprehensive settlement of the Palestinian question, including resolution of the status of Jerusalem.
- Regional stability in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf.

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- Gulf regional cooperation through a system of Arab-American and Iranian-American partnerships, with Saudi Arabia and Iran being the two “pillars” of the partnership edifice.

- Continued availability of oil to the consuming countries.

By late 1975, it became apparent that new policies were required with respect to three of these objectives: a Palestine settlement, Gulf stability, and availability of oil. These objectives became the focus of the Carter Administration’s Mideast policy. With this as prologue, we shall turn now to the link between the Palestinian conflict and Gulf security and the effect of this link on American strategic interests in the area.

RESOLUTION OF THE PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: CASE FOR ITS CENTRALITY

The argument that a solution to the Palestinian conflict is essential to American strategic interests in the Persian Gulf rests on three basic concepts. First, dependency on Gulf oil makes the area an integral part of America’s national interest.⁷ Second, the cooperation of Gulf governments, most of which are Arab and Islamic, is crucial for the United States in its endeavor to guard its national interest. Third, since Palestine is an important variable in their foreign policy, most Gulf governments have made it amply clear to the United States that they will not establish close relations with Washington until it resolves the Palestinian conflict.

The link between oil and Palestine is particularly significant in light of the stark economic fact that any massive interruption of oil supplies from Persian Gulf countries would have a catastrophic effect on most of the economies of the free world. In recent testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. John C. Sawhill, Deputy Secretary of Energy, made the following points:⁸

- Two-thirds of total free-world oil reserves are located in the Persian Gulf area.

- Persian Gulf countries produce about two-thirds of all oil in world trade and about 40 percent of total free-world oil output.

- Because of their small populations, Persian Gulf countries consume only one-twentieth of the oil they produce, a situation that is not likely to change through the mid-1980’s.

- The vital role of the Persian Gulf in providing the free world with the oil it needs to maintain acceptable levels of economic growth will change little in the years ahead.

- Total dependence of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (comprising 19 European nations, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) on imported oil will not be significantly reduced before the mid-1980’s.

Of course, American policymakers have been aware of these realities, at least in broad outline, and their potential impact upon American political options since the mid-1970’s. Successive secretaries of state and other high government officials have often emphasized that a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict would serve American ends. As early as September 1975, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stated that a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict was required to protect “the fundamental national interest of the United States,” and that it was imperative for the United States to have an active role in the pursuit of a settlement. He offered the following reasons:

- Our historical and moral commitment to the survival and well-being of Israel.

- Our important interests in the Arab world—an area containing more than 150 million people and sitting astride the world’s largest oil reserves.

- The severe strain in relations with our allies in Europe and Japan that would result in the event of a crisis in the Middle East.

- The threat to the economic well-being, not only of the industrial world but of most nations of the globe, posed by continuing instability in the Gulf area.

- The inevitable and growing risk of a direct US-Soviet confrontation posed by crises in the Middle East.⁹

Former Secretary of State Vance recently embraced essentially the same position as Kissinger:

The solution of the Arab-Israeli dispute

is . . . necessary for the achievement of peace and stability in the region. Therefore, one of the most important matters that we and others have to devote our attention to is an effort to try and bring about a satisfactory resolution of the Palestinian problem.¹⁰

Nor is this view restricted to the State Department. In recent months, editorials in the country's major newspapers have also advocated a vigorous American approach to resolve the Palestinian conflict for reasons of American self-interest. A recent editorial in the *Miami Herald* stated: "The Palestinian question, of course, is the principal sore point between the United States and the Islamic world. A solution is essential—and now—or the whole Mideast peace plan so carefully woven at Camp David may come unravelled."¹¹ "Movement on the Palestinian issue," stated *The Christian Science Monitor*, "is essential to stability in the Middle East."¹²

A resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict has thus come to imply a comprehensive resolution of the Palestinian conflict. To most, if not all Arab and Islamic states, an acceptable resolution must at a minimum provide for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and recognition of the legitimate national rights of the Palestinians. Recognition of the Palestinians' right to self-determination has become a major plank of the foreign policies of most Arab states. More recently, self-determination has also been endorsed by most West European governments.

Arab and Islamic states have condemned the Camp David accords because they see nothing in the accords that approximates the principle of self-determination. To these states, perhaps unfairly, the Camp David accords and the subsequent autonomy talks were a prelude to Egyptian-Israeli hegemony along the rim of the Southeastern Mediterranean under an American umbrella. However, both the United States and Egypt have consistently stated that the Camp David formula will lead to a more comprehensive solution.

Moderate Arab and Islamic states, headed by Saudi Arabia, have denounced the Egyptian-Israeli treaty as a separate agreement but have left the door open for future cooperation.¹³ The minimum demand for cooperation is defined in terms of self-determination, which they see as leading to an independent political existence for the Palestinian people. The Saudi position on the Palestinian conflict has been quite clear. In the words of Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, the Saudi position "is based on the right of the Palestinians themselves to determine whether they want an independent state, or an entity with links to another solution."¹⁴

A strong argument can therefore be made for vigorous American action toward a settlement based on Palestinian self-determination. However, one question immediately comes to mind: What benefits and what costs would accrue to the United States from such action? In brief, a strong American move toward a comprehensive settlement would be applauded by most Arab and Islamic states, Third World countries, and Western Europe. Even the Soviet Union might find it politically useful to support such a move, despite the risk that Moscow would be shut out of the process.

Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and perhaps Iraq, would see in this action a means to escape the Palestinian burden. Further, they would feel more comfortable in dealing openly with the United States in Gulf security matters. Many Gulf leaders have already indicated, both publicly and in private, that they and Washington hold similar views on regional security and that defense cooperation could become a reality once they are no longer constrained by the Palestinian matter.

Arab-American trade and commerce would also benefit from a resolution of the conflict. Gulf countries would be far more prone to expand economic relations with the United States, particularly in the realm of technology transfers, once inhibitions revolving around boycotts of companies dealing with Israel are dissipated.

In the political sphere, an American-

supported comprehensive settlement would enhance stability in several of the countries. Moderate Arab leaders would be seen by their populaces as having won an important victory. Further, Palestinians residing in Gulf countries would no longer be viewed as internal threats.

There will also be costs. Israel would vigorously oppose any action on the part of the US government for a comprehensive settlement and would marshal all of its considerable political resources, both domestic and foreign, to thwart any settlement it opposes. Repercussions would certainly be felt in American domestic politics. Washington would be accused of abandoning Israel, even though the security of Israel has been a cardinal principle of American foreign policy since 1948. The President and his foreign policy staff would come under enormous pressures, and he might suffer politically. It should be noted, however, that the Israeli settlements policy in the occupied areas of the West Bank and, most recently, its unilateral declaration making Jerusalem its indivisible capital have not set well with the American public or, for that matter, with large numbers of prominent American Jews.¹⁵

RESOLUTION OF THE PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: CASE AGAINST ITS CENTRALITY

Several points have been advanced in support of the argument that solving the Palestinian conflict would not necessarily further America's interests in the Persian Gulf. Regional stability, this argument maintains, is a function of many tensions essentially extrinsic to the Palestinian conflict. Such tensions include the following: demographic (small indigenous populations vs. large expatriate communities); religious (Shias vs. Sunnis); ideological (conservatives vs. leftists and monarchists vs. republicans); territorial (border disputes); economic (oil-producing states vs. non-producing states); socioeconomic (rich vs. poor); political (authoritarianism vs. popular participation);

and ethnic or tribal (rivalries among Arab, Iranian, Kurdish, Baluchi, Alawite, Druze, Turkish, etc.).

These tensions, which long predate the questions of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict, have erupted into bloody wars sporadically over the centuries. The Iraq-Iran war, having no connection with Israel, is a case in point. The displacement of the Palestinians, this argument maintains, is only one ingredient among many in the Middle East, so that a resolution of their plight will have only a marginal effect on the internal stability of states in the region. Internal stability will continue to be in jeopardy owing to such factors as rapid modernization, religious fanaticism, autocratic tribal rule, the spread of education, enhanced communications, and the resulting importation of "alien" ideas.

Further, it is argued, resolution will have little effect on OPEC's policies—in terms of both oil availability and pricing. Despite past efforts to act as a cartel, OPEC's policies in the long run will be governed largely by market conditions, which are themselves primarily a function of the unabating demand for oil in the industrial countries and the apparent inability or unwillingness of these countries to adopt substantive energy conservation measures. Meanwhile, developing countries are suffering perhaps even more than the developed countries from the inflated prices of petroleum, despite token attempts through loans and credits from the oil-producers to ease the adverse economic effects.

On the regional level, numerous border disputes remain unsettled, and practically every Gulf state is involved in one or more territorial disputes with its neighbors. Iran, for example, still occupies three small Gulf islands claimed by the United Arab Emirates. The resulting cold war among the Arab states or between the Arab states and Iran is thus no new phenomenon in the Gulf, nor is superpower rivalry in the Middle East as a whole. Therefore, according to this argument, neither the domestic nor the regional variables which influence security

and stability would be much affected by resolution of the Palestinian conflict or its continuance.

On the basis of such factors as those above, Irving Kristol has argued that the Palestinian conflict "is not the central or prime issue in the quest for peace in the Middle East."¹⁶ Rita Hauser posits that a settlement will not "result in a significant improvement in terms of trade between the United States and OPEC."¹⁷ Others have argued against a quest for a settlement on the ground that it would eventually result in the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Such a state, according to these observers, would be irredentist, PLO-run, and Soviet-influenced, and would pose a serious threat to other states in the area.

But if the United States were to accept the foregoing position and not push for a resolution of the conflict, what would be the costs and benefits to US strategic interests in the Persian Gulf? Advocates of the position have not truly faced this question, because it would be difficult to expect any tangible benefits for the United States. If Washington were to withdraw from its quest for Middle East peace, it would be extremely damaging to American prestige abroad and to American influence in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Our strategic interests in the Gulf would suffer, and we would find it difficult to protect those interests without the cooperation of local states. Our credibility would plummet throughout the Gulf and worldwide. The forces of moderation in the area would suffer a severe setback, and their American connection would be damaged—perhaps irreparably. With the United States out of the picture, pro-settlement forces would then turn to Europe, possibly inviting a Euro-Soviet initiative. We would be shut out of the process, possibly to our detriment. The forces of radicalism would flourish, portending more violence for the region. Some Arab oil producers would be tempted to return to the use of the oil weapon against the United States. The Carter Administration placed high stakes on the quest for a Middle East settlement, and it would be disastrous to abandon the process or to let it grind to a halt.

CONCLUSIONS

In summing up the effect of a resolution of the Palestinian conflict on US strategic interests in the Persian Gulf, several observations are in order.

- Regional stability would offer the best environment for the United States to pursue its interests in the Gulf peacefully.

- In pursuit of these interests—economic and strategic—the United States would need the cooperation of Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, with which the United States has strong economic ties.

- Saudi Arabian leaders have clearly stated that the Palestinian case is the core of the Middle East conflict, and that without a solution stability cannot be restored in the region. In Saudi thinking, the link between Gulf stability and a resolution of the Palestinian conflict is intrinsic and indissoluble.

- Although OPEC's oil policies have been to a large extent economically motivated, politics have become a vital factor. For the Arab members of OPEC, the politics of Palestine have permeated the policies of oil to the very core, and it would be naive to think otherwise.

- While the Palestinian conflict is a crucial factor in the Gulf, it is nonetheless only one factor. Regional stability, which is linked to internal stability, might be threatened by intrastate ethnic, political, religious, and even economic conflicts and rivalries.

- The United States is still broadly perceived in the Middle East as being the only state capable of resolving the Palestinian conflict. America's leadership in the Camp David process affirms this perception.

- Most foreign policy elites in this country are of the opinion that the Palestinian conflict and US interests in the Middle East are inextricably linked. The Atlantic Council's Special Working Group on the Middle East, for example, stated recently that "the Arab-Israeli conflict remains central to the evolution of the entire Middle East and to American and Western interests there."¹⁸ Based on its Strategy for Peace

Conference in October 1979, the Stanley Foundation opined that "the key to an overall settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict is a just and equitable resolution of the Palestinian question."¹⁹

On the basis of the foregoing observations, one can correctly conclude that resolving the Palestinian conflict would have a strongly positive effect on US strategic interests in the Gulf; that Washington should pursue a settlement with resolve and tenacity; and that Arab-American relations would be greatly enhanced by such a settlement. While one cannot argue that our energy crisis would somehow dissipate or that the prices would fall as a result of a settlement, it is safe to assume that the resulting environment of enhanced peace and stability would be more conducive to economic cooperation. Certainly a resolution of the Palestinian conflict would not accomplish miracles, but it would produce very positive benefits.

NOTES

1. William J. Baroody Sr., "What a Palestinian Solution Will Solve," *The Washington Post*, 7 November 1979, p. A19.
2. Irving Kristol, "What a Palestine Solution Won't Solve," *The Washington Post*, 25 October 1979, p. A21.
3. Message to Congress, 12 March 1947. Quoted in Ralph E. Magnus, ed., *Documents on the Middle East* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1969), p. 66. Herein referred to as *Documents*.
4. Message to Congress, 5 January 1957. Quoted in *Documents*, pp. 90-91.
5. Annual report to Congress, 18 February 1979.

Quoted in *U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970's: A New Strategy for Peace* (Washington: GPO, 1970), pp. 6-7.

6. Jimmy Carter, "The State of the Union," address to Congress on 23 January 1980, in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 28 January 1980, p. 197.

7. Obviously, the industrialized nations of Western Europe and Japan are more dependent than the United States upon Mideast oil. To the extent that US security is dependent upon the economic strength and well-being of its allies, American security becomes even more bound up with the free flow of oil from the Gulf.

8. Testimony of John C. Sawhill, Deputy Secretary, Department of Energy, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 20 February 1980, pp. 2-3, unpublished.

9. Department of State, *U.S. Policy in the Middle East: November 1974-February 1976*, Selected Documents, No. 4, 1976, p. 10.

10. Quoted in "Excerpts From the Interview With Secretary Vance," *The New York Times*, 16 January 1980, p. A14.

11. "Autonomy for Palestinians Key to U.S.-Israel Relations," *Miami Herald*, 13 February 1980, p. A6.

12. Daniel Southerland, "Carter Initiative Faces Difficulties," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 March 1980, p. 1.

13. There are disturbing signs, however, that Saudi Arabia's traditionally moderate stance may be hardening. Crown Prince Fahd, for example, was recently quoted as having said that war was "the only answer to . . . Zionist religious and racist arrogance" ("Peace With Israel Illusory, Saudi Says," *The New York Times*, 14 August 1980, p. A7). The new Saudi position appears to be in reaction to Israeli moves to make an indivisible Jerusalem its capital.

14. Jim Hoagland, "Saudi Politely Disagrees on Palestinians," *The Washington Post*, 5 October 1979, p. A5.

15. See "Key U.S. Jews Back Israel's Peace Move," *The New York Times*, 2 July 1980, pp. A1, A3.

16. Kristol, p. A21.

17. Rita E. Hauser, "Israel and the United States" (letter to the editor), *Foreign Affairs*, 58 (Spring 1980), 952-53.

18. Atlantic Council of the United States, *Oil and Turmoil: Western Choices in the Middle East* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1979), p. 35.

19. *Strategy for Peace: U.S. Foreign Policy Conference, October 25-28, 1979* (Muscatine, Iowa: Stanley Foundation, 1980), p. 13.

