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NATO and the Middle East

by

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NATO AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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NATO AND THE MIDDLE EAST

When NATO was established there was no reference to any territory beyond that of the member countries and adjacent waterways -- the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean. NATO did not encompass any Middle Eastern territories except for Greece and Turkey which were included in the alliance to provide strategical advantage relative to the USSR in the unlikely event of a conventional war. NATO was an alliance aimed at the Soviet Union and in the early days of NATO the United States and the Soviet Union pursued parallel policies in the Middle East. Indeed, as we all remember, the Soviet Union beat the United States to the recognition of Israel by several hours. Divergences in policies regarding the recently created Israel and the rather diverse set of Arab states in the region were to be found among allied policies not between the so-called West and the so-called East.

The Middle East was excluded from NATO territorial domain for several reasons: first, the geographical distance of most of the middle eastern countries from the core of NATO which is the North Atlantic, not the Mediterranean; second, the strong unwillingness of the British and French governments to encourage an active American role in the Middle East; and third, the essential agreement between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. on the evolving state of affairs in the Middle East testified to the lack of salience of the region to U.S.-Soviet strategic position in Europe.

It is always tempting to rewrite history at subsequent stages when analyzing relationships but it is critically important to keep the historical record clear. Indeed, if we look at the evolution of middle eastern policy, we note that in its earliest stages, roughly from 1947 through 1951, American and Allied policies expressed the colonial contradictions between American and

Allied (principally British and French) policies. The United States by 1947 was pursuing an anti-colonialist policy following its initial support for the reestablishment of Western colonialism in Asia and the Middle East. By 1947 the United States was pressing France to liberate Syria and Lebanon and pressing the British about their colonial ties in Palestine. The Dutch were forced out of Indonesia and American policy was widely viewed to have assisted in the granting of independence to India, Pakistan and Burma. The policies of the Truman administration were resented by European political leaders even those whose government supported decolonialization (for example, Clement Atlee and Aneurin Bevan in the U.K.).

The resentment expressed against American policy is not unfounded. In 1947 U.S. policy shifted diametrically from that pursued by Truman from his arrival upon the scene in 1945. Shortly after he assumed office, and despite the recommendations of his people in the field (including the OSS representative Archimedes Patti), Truman sought the advice of the British Ambassador to the U.S. which led to the American policy decision to reinstitute French colonialization in Indo-China. About two years later the same President Truman adopted a policy of literally forcing the Dutch administration in Indonesia to withdraw from that colony. The policy adopted in 1947 was more in line with that of the Roosevelt administration. But while some clarity and precision appeared in South East Asia, it would be difficult to attribute much clarity and precision to American policy in the Middle East. French and British policies were not at all receptive to a diminished role in the Middle East.

British policy in the region was informed by several factors; first, continuity with its colonial past especially now that India, Pakistan and Burma were no longer part of the British Raj. The decision to turn Greece over

to the Americans in 1947 coupled with the end of empire in the Indian subcontinent strengthened British desires to retain the presence in the Middle East and encouraged the sense of reliance upon the glorious colonial past. Additionally, the notion that the Middle East might become part of an American sphere of influence was anathema to the British intelligentsia. After all, the Americans, while much less boorish than the Russians were boorish. The British felt that American policymakers did not understand the subtleties involved in middle eastern politics and were too prone to base policy decisions on quick and dirty assessments.

A second basis for British concern rested upon perceived requirements for reliable and stable supplies of oil flowing from the Persian Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula. British interest in Iranian and Arabian oil certainly went back to the early part of the century which found the British actively involved in seeking to prevent any current or even potential Russian interest in securing Iranian oil concessions. (We must remind ourselves that the Russians were formerly an oil importing country while the Americans were still heavily engaged in exporting oil).

A third general factor in the British approach rested upon a latent and often not so latent anti-semitism on the part of British leaders. British policymakers had little regard for the Wogs of the region but had even less regard for the Jews who were establishing the basis for their state in Palestine. Not surprisingly, British policy was ambivalent and it came to the question of which Arabs should rule or what subordinate role should be played by Jews in a new emerging independent Palestine state.

French policy was slightly different from British policy in that while the British were preoccupied with an imperial role the French tended to be preoccupied by imperial glory. French policy rested first on the premise that

French glory (la Gloire de France) must be reestablished. With British assistance and American confusion, the French were able to kick off the traces of an axis past (Vichy France) and pretend that France was a victorious power who helped to defeat the Germans and the Japanese. But Vichy was created by Germany quite intelligently as the device to transform the enemy France into the allied France which resulted in transforming most French colonies from allied territories to enemy territories in World War II. Thus, Indo-China was neither invaded nor conquered by the Japanese rather it became a staging post and base for Japanese conquest in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and elsewhere. Through convenient diplomatic maneuvering and political posturing, General de Gaulle was permitted to play the role of the victor.

French collaboration provided serious, ideological and psychological bases for French guilt and displaced animosity toward the Americans who were easily dismissed as having no sensitivity and understanding of the role played by France in the region. We should also recall that during the great traumas suffered by the French in the 1950's and 60's both in the Indo-China and North Africa, the United States was neither sympathetic nor supportive for the most part nor did we act anymore as a general ally than we had with the Dutch in Indonesia in 1947. The Americans did not confuse alliance in NATO with collaboration in the colonial region or in regions somewhat distant from NATO's territorial base.

Contrary to common usage, an alliance is not an association of states which agree on everything. It is neither general nor comprehensive. An alliance is but a set of states acting in concert at a given time to enhance their mutual security against a common adversary. The high point of the NATO alliance occurred in April, 1949 when the alliance was formed. In 1949, the United States had an absolute hegemony in Western Europe and the U.S.S.R had

an absolute hegemony in Eastern Europe. As Western European recovery proceeded in the ensuing years, national policies expressing diverse interests began to surface in an increasingly important and often discordant matter.

In 1949, all efforts were aimed at wedding American attention and interest firmly in the support of Western European foreign policy and security requirements. As the U.S. subsequently localized its reactions to perceived Soviet threatening behavior, Western European interest began to establish some perceptible distance from American policy. While all Western states supported American policy in Korea, European political leaders began to show concern that American involvement in Asia might weaken the American intent and capability to defend Western Europe from a direct threat. Europeans, for example, were not reassured by the rhetoric of the Eisenhower administration since it was accompanied by a significant demilitarization of American foreign policy. By the end of the Eisenhower term, the United States lacked sufficient military force to intervene effectively in another war such as Korea. While most European countries fully supported this withdrawal from military confrontation on the Asian continent, they also worried about what would be augered by an inability of the American government to come to some reasonable support of European states short of nuclear war. Resort to the use of nuclear weapons was so unlikely as to be ruled out of the question; yet, American policy for the defense of Europe was based upon the concept of massive retaliation which said that a defense of Europe would require the use of nuclear weapons which we made very clear were not to be used except in the unlikely event of a direct Soviet military attack upon the United States -- an attack which was technologically impossible for almost a decade later.

The United States response to the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the American reaction to the British-French intervention

in Suez 1956, supported the general conclusion that the United States was less than a reliable defender of European interests. Rather, the United States was seen to be defending American interests in Europe. There is a subtle yet important difference that is directly related to the recently expressed questions concerning coupling and decoupling of European and American policies.

The intervention by Britain and France in Egypt in 1956 sought to force Eisenhower's hand by leaving him no choice but to support the "allied" position. But Eisenhower did not follow the same scenario; he demanded the withdrawal of British and French troops and the removal of Israeli forces back to Israeli territory by guaranteeing Israeli passage through the Suez Canal and the Strait of Tiran even if the American Navy had to convoy Israeli ships through. The result of the failure of the invasion is familiar to all of us; Nasser's position was strengthened, he was not forced out of office as intended by the Anglo-French move, and Israeli shipping did not obtain use of the Strait and the Canal until after the peace treaty signed at Camp David. The American guarantee to the Israelis was clearly hyperbole, not policy, but the more significant result was the defeat of two friendly governments, one of whom had convinced itself that it had a special relationship with the United States. Anthony Eden's government fell directly as a result of American opposition to his policies in Suez; and, while the Fourth Republic managed to limp on for two more years before it was subsequently overthrown in the coup of 1958, the coup de grace was delivered at Suez. How could French gloire survive the defeat in Indo-China, the ravages of surging revolution in Nigeria, and the "betrayal" of the Americans as a result of Suez.

No longer could any European regime claim that it enjoyed the sensitive support of the United States. Each European government was now subject to the

charge that its leaders were lackeys of American policy -- of a policy driven by Americans who did not understand the subtleties and nuances of Middle Eastern politics. British and French political leaders could not continue what was considered a charade of submitting to American leadership in this area. Anthony Eden was the most pro-American of any post-war British leader and the Americans betrayed him when he most needed their support. And, the Fourth Republic yielded to General de Gaulle's concept of a French presidential monarchy which established clearly French independence from American direction. When de Gaulle led France out of the military organization of NATO, the press mistakenly reported that he had abandoned NATO. He had done no such thing. What de Gaulle achieved (and is still practiced by the French government) was the establishment of the independence of French foreign policy initiatives from the dominating presence of the Americans. He sought to do this not to delimit or diminish American security guarantees for France vis a vis the Soviet Union; indeed, he simply moved American forces farther North and East to Belgium and to Germany; he did not seek to have American forces removed from Europe. De Gaulle established the independence of French policy most particularly to demonstrate that French interests and U.S. policies differed with respect to most of the Third World particularly in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

De Gaulle's demand for a directorate of the Western Alliance comprising France, Britain and the United States was but a ploy to establish the notion that were France to continue to participate generally in American foreign policy France had to have a voice equal to the American President in the making of that policy, that France could not be led down the path of supporting the achievement of American interests when they were not at the same time French interests.

Now one thing an alliance is not is an expression of common interests. Alliance members in a very active alliance may try to find and establish coalitions with respect to specific issues but the interests do not become common any more than their experiences, attitudes and desires become common. During Suez, American interests in the Middle East were somewhat episodic. We were not quite certain what we wanted to achieve in the region. We had not yet decided with any precision what kind of formations should exist other than the continued existence of Israel. Americans were not yet in need of Arabian oil but merely wanted to protect oil supplies for our European allies - an almost philanthropic desire. In subsequent years we became more and more involved in the region until by the time of the overthrow of the Shah in Iran by the forces of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the United States had identified assorted interests far in excess of anything that could be justified by statistical analyses of American dependence on imported petroleum or other products. Concomitant with the newly expressed American intensity of interest, was the developing Soviet juxtaposition to American policy. We should recall that American and Soviet policy in the early post-war period was very cooperative in the Middle East. Regardless of the reasons for it, the U.S. and the Soviet Union together brought pressure upon the French, the British, and the Israelis in 1956 although we Americans deplored the style of the Russian admonition to the Western Allies. We collaborated with the Russians in securing the end to all of the Israeli-Arab wars until after the Yom Kippur War (1973). The Middle East has become a region that dramatically underscores the European concerns for the quality of American leadership vis a vis the Soviet Union and we enter a very tangled web of Byzantine policies. What has been evolving in recent years in the Middle East is an American definition of strategic interest in the Middle East that differs widely from

and somewhat threatens European access to the very resources that are needed. The Middle East helps to establish the distance of the U.S. from diverse European polities rather than demonstrate the opportunity for NATO to coordinate alliance policy. After all it was the European members of NATO who refused to permit their air bases to be used by American military personnel to reinforce the Israeli's during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Only the base in the Azores remained open and that is of course not likely to be available since the Portuguese Revolution.

There is fundamental disagreement if not outright conflict between the American and diverse European positions among the member of the Alliance with respect to the Middle East. This stems from diverse interpretations of both regional and global situations. Most important is the American globalization of conflict and rivalry with the Soviet Union. The extent to which the United States projects U.S.-Soviet rivalry into regional disputes, such as in the Middle East, in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, etc., distresses Europeans who are preoccupied with their own problems in the region. Globalizing conflict to the extent that all serious rifts are posited, in essence, as attempts by international communism to sway events and men in distant places denies legitimacy to the substance of regional and local conflicts.

Paradoxically, positing the Middle East situation as a principal area of East-West discord denies the Russians a legitimate role in resolving Middle Eastern conflicts. Thus, while the Russians helped end the fighting in the Yom Kippur War, they were denied any role in the evolving Israeli-Egyptian peace accords signed at Camp David. But not only the Russians were excluded, so too were the British and French.

It is not surprising that there is a lack of concordance among the allies with respect to the Middle East or any other extra alliance area. Indeed, it

should be surprising to find concordance within the alliance. While it is convenient to refer to NATO as a bloc it is only a bloc in relation to a posture concerning a possible Soviet attack upon members of the alliance. As a multilateral alliance NATO is really set of dyadic alliances some of which are more important than others. Analytically, NATO is a set of two hundred and forty dyadic alliances which operate within the framework of the multilateral alliance. When we talk in the loose form of usual discourse, we sweep under the rug all sorts of diverse conflicts and disagreements among the allied members. To cite just two examples; the Anglo-Icelandic "fisheries war" and the Greece-Turkey conflict over the islands in the Aegean and Cyprus. While the "fisheries war" has been long resolved, Greece continues to arm against Turkey in the guise of erecting a defence against possible Soviet aggression and Turkey arms against Greece under the same rationale. Is it any wonder that there is sufficient conflict within those diverse dyads with respect to policy affecting the Middle East?

Thus far this paper has focused on military-security matters relating to the development of policy. Yet, military-security issues are subordinate to political-economic concerns in the development of national policies despite the apparent preoccupation by major powers. The essence of relationships among nations is political, not military, and is preoccupied with the ambiguous goals of survival and well-being which are not necessarily achieved by military-security policies. Particularly in democratic countries military-security policies are subordinate to conditions and perceptions of economic well-being on the part of the body politic. Questions concerning the political economies of the individual countries take precedence even over the overarching question of security from military attack. And the political-economic questions prompt increasingly difficult conflictual

relationships not greater solidarity among allies in the foreign policy arena. We must relate some of the macro-political questions to the set of other nonpolitical issues in order to wind our way through this morass of relationships.

In the economic arena conditions of conflict among principal allies have increased over the years at a more rapid and pressing rate than conditions of conflict between the superpowers. In the first two decades of NATO intra-allied conflict was minimal because from 1949-1969 Britain and France were dependent upon American economic goodwill and Germany had no independent policy; that is, Germany adopted the very intelligent pose of not asserting any political leadership which would have exposed her to collateral attack. It was during this period that the United States, as the hegemonic power within the alliance, pressed for high levels of military cooperation but only provided rhetorical support for movements toward European economic integration. Real progress toward achieving true economic integration of Western Europe would have been threatening to the American economic position in Europe and elsewhere. It is not at all surprising that the United States helped to reinforce posturing rather than unification and equally clear that the achievement of unification among the European states was unlikely because of essential rivalries. The developing events of the decades since World War II have witnessed the rebirth of an economic nationalism and neo-mercantilism that is more reminiscent of the 1920s and '30s than of any other comparable period. Nation-states engaged in competitive economic relations seeking to establish positions of competitive advantage do not develop policies that seek harmony; rather, they seek competitive advantage, if not primacy.

It is not surprising that NATO has not developed an energy policy, in the true sense of the term; i.e., regulating pricing, production, distribution,

delivery, access and the like. It is also not surprising that the European Community has also not developed a real energy policy particularly in light of the fact that few if any individual national governments have been able to arrive at a rational energy policy for their economies. What is left is a scramble for national advantage in establishing access to energy sources at "reasonable" costs which leads to competition that does not reinforce concepts of identifying collaborative policies relative to the Middle East. France and Germany, for example, seek to strike deals which assure access to adequate petroleum supplies.

The set of economic relationships that had been developed at the end of World War II were beginning to unravel by the late 1960's and early 1970's. As was noted, largely as a result of American initiative, diverse European powers and Japan became increasingly more important economic actors in ways that were not well understood nor managed by the Nixon Administration which was in other respects probably the most sophisticated administration in the foreign policy arena since World War II. The American economic superiority established as a result of the war began to deteriorate particularly under the pressures of American preoccupation in Vietnam. But the warning signs had already been present. American policy helped sow the seeds for what was to become very near a situation of economic warfare among the advanced industrial countries. West-West conflict in the economic sphere began to outweigh East-West conflict in the political sphere. At the very time that the Nixon Administration was managing its political relations with the Eastern bloc it was losing its position of managing its economic relations with its allies and trading partners.

Despite the recent economic upsurge, by and large the United States' economic position has been declining since World War II although the trend

line was not so clear until the mid '70s. (In a similar fashion one can argue that the British economic position has exhibited signs of secular decline from roughly the last quarter of the nineteenth century through to the present day). The decline in the American economic fortunes has had a major impact upon the American political position both within and without the alliance even though that impact was hidden for sometime. The relative decline of the U.S. was more than offset by accelerated appreciation of West German, Swiss, Swedish and even French fortunes, for example. Economically, West Europe and Japan prospered as America declined and the economic stakes for Western Europeans became more cherishable and required defending from what was perceived to be intemperate or misguided U.S. economic policy while the Soviet Union posed but a latent military threat to Western Europe. U.S. economic policies had immediate consequences that did not reinforce a spirit of cooperation.

The watershed for post-war economic policy is provided by the series of events running from late 1971 to 1973 when the U.S. devalued, demonetized, and floated the dollar. The Nixon Administration yielded to a frustration that had been building for some years and had not resulted from policies largely of its own making. The U.S. dollar had been significantly overvalued and the Germans and Japanese particularly were perceived to be prospering at American expense. The American economic hegemony had been turned on its head yielding a U.S. administration first pleading for, then cajoling and ultimating demanding corrective action that has not yet taken place. The Bretton Woods economic system was scrapped in large part and no replacement is yet in sight. Economic policies among the allies came to be marked by a resurgent economic nationalism, neo-mercantilism, and protection. The imposition of nontariff barriers has been accelerating since the end of the Nixon Administration and

shows no signs of diminishing.

The enveloping disarray in international economic relations has been accompanied by discordant energy policies whose pressures are currently abated by what is likely to be a temporary oil glut. The present excess of energy supply over demand results in part from the impact of the global recession which is still underway in Western Europe and shows signs of returning to the U.S. and from American conservation efforts encouraged by high energy costs. But energy costs did not simply rise seeking some natural level -- they increased in large part in response to U.S. policy. The rapid decline in the dollar's value from 1971-1973 was a factor since oil is priced in dollars. In October 1973 OPEC increased oil prices in part to "punish" the West for supporting Israel but also in order to recover value lost by the declining dollar. Further, the U.S. urged Iran to press for significantly greater increases in order to provide Iran with more foreign exchange to purchase weapons and to promote conservation in the U.S. At its December 1973 meeting OPEC added approximately seven dollars to its price per barrel bringing the posted price to \$12.65. Kissinger was reported to have despaired at Congress' ability to adopt an energy policy raising prices adequate to promote conservation.

The nexus of economic and energy policies had enormous consequences for the West and provided no particular advantage for the United States. The political sophistication manifested by the Nixon Administration was not matched in the economic arena and contributed to allied determination to pursue economic and energy policies independent of the U.S. Confidence in American leadership was wanting; latent suspicions of American insensitivity and inadequacy were aroused, only to be compounded by dismay at Watergate which was neither understood nor appreciated in Europe. Compounding European

distress concerning U.S. leadership were the confusing alarms and signals emanating from Washington regarding Angola, Somalia, the War Powers Act, and the Mayaguez Incident, and were reinforced by more recent American gestures in Lebanon and in the Caribbean.

President Carter's signing of the SALT II agreement and subsequently withdrawing it from active consideration in the Senate was not reassuring to Europeans who questioned the stability of American leadership. Neither was the handling of the neutron bomb incident nor the Schmidt initiative regarding the development of intermediate range weapons in response to the newly developed Soviet SS 20 missiles. Adding insult to injury was the handling of the concept "detente" by Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan and the flap that developed over the question of the Soviet gas pipeline to West Europe which was very badly handled by both the Carter and the Reagan Administrations. The net effect of all of these diverse factors was not to reinforce European reliance upon American leadership but to encourage Europeans to seek to establish their own bargains and deals with respect to all of these issues.

In the economic arena we all witnessed the effects of the immense transfer of wealth from energy consuming countries to the energy producers. New holders of vast numbers of dollars brought their money into the financial markets and the sources of most of those petro dollars were Arab financiers. The New York and London financial capitals became dependent upon Arab dollars to transact their business. While the United States was somewhat immune to the impact of Arab financing, Western European countries were not. They now had a new economic giant to deal with and that giant was hostile to the American supported position of the Israelis. The impact of the new economic realities, together with the introduction by the U.S.S.R. of new and more threatening modes of nuclear blackmail aimed at Western Europe tied to the

discrediting of detente by American political leadership, served as impetus to European states to establish their own policies. They now had to have independent economic policies which were competitive not only with the United States but which challenged the premises of American policy. European publics began to raise serious questions about the increased danger of being linked up to the United States. The increase in defense expenditures in the United States which began as a Carter Administration reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afganistan was accelerated even further by the Reagan Administration which has not yet demonstrated true resolve to deal with the Russians politically on the sensitive issues raised by the security dilemma. The European members of NATO feel that they are in an exposed position which places them in the unhappy circumstance of being the most likely venue for the waging of a war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, unlikely as that eventuality remains.

What are the implications for all these factors for NATO and the Middle East? First, it is unlikely that there will be any coordination of policies by the European states and the United States with respect to the Middle East. The Europeans are increasingly going to be more receptive and supportive of Arab claims than Israeli claims to questions of territory, status and even longevity because of the impact of Arab petroleum supplies.

While the United States has demonstrated an ability to refrain from intervening in the Iran-Iraq War, American posturing on the situation in the Persian Gulf was not terribly reassuring to European political leaders. The danger of an American challenge to the Russians relative to intervention remains even while it is unlikely. And were such intervention to occur, European access to the Gulf would be threatened.

A related aspect rests precisely in the area of establishing some distance from American policy. Particularly with the introduction of the

Pershing II and cruise missiles into Western Europe, there is a developing need for European political leaders to demonstrate independence from and, to some degree, decoupling of diverse European foreign policies from that of the United States. Relations with Middle Eastern countries provides a very good opportunity for such an assertion of independence.

A third factor that develops logically from the first two rests upon the need for the maintenance of the discrete separation of regional from global conflicts. This is related to the first two factors but should be stated explicitly. The propensity of the United States and the Soviet Union, to project their interests into regional disputes is destabilizing and unnerving. The greater the extent of U.S.-Soviet confrontation, the more likely it will be for regional powers to seek to distance themselves from the superpowers.

To some extent this situation should exist among the middle eastern countries. But it is difficult to be achieved. Israel over the years has put all its eggs in one basket, not entirely of its own choosing, by becoming so inextricably tied up in the American relationship. While it likes to see itself in the role of the "honest broker," the U.S. starts from a premise of commitment to the principal Israeli positions relative to status, territory, etc. In spite of disclaimers, the effect of the Reagan Administration's intervention into Lebanon was the promotion of Israeli goals in the region. Reagan may have convinced himself otherwise, but Arab states and European states were not blind to the effects of U.S. policy.

A more difficult situation exists with the question of who are legitimate actors who must be brought into any real attempts to establish regional peace. American policy to exclude the Russians from participating in any settlement makes sense in terms of positioning American interest as primary in the region. It has consequences at the same time: particularly it creates the

opportunity for the Russians to impose a veto upon potential peace arrangements. Of course, the United States may oppose reentry of a Russian diplomatic presence into the Middle East because, for the United States, a comprehensive settlement of disputes between Israel and her neighbors may be less important than the exclusion of Soviet interests and involvement.

Survival rather than solutions of Middle Eastern disputes may be the best practicable outcome attainable in the foreseeable future. If we recall the wars and conflicts raging throughout Europe for centuries, and compare that history of turmoil and upheaval to the relatively benign current situation, we may glean some useful insights. It is likely that the sublimation of diverse competitive European claims to territory, status, and position may have been subsumed by the overarching conflict between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. It was not until these two essentially European actors became the most important European bloc leaders that indigenous European rivalries were suppressed. The lesson provided by that experience is not a terribly optimistic one to be projected upon the Middle East. But then Europe has had forty years of peace and, to a large extent, prosperity. Forty years of peace and prosperity would not be such a bad thing for the Middle East.