
Is Israel the Problem?

Amir Taberi

FIFTEEN YEARS ago, after the first defeat of Saddam Hussein and the liberation of Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker faced the question of how best to exploit the American victory as a means of stabilizing the Middle East. The obvious course would have been to deploy the immensely enhanced prestige of the United States, backed by its unprecedented military presence in the Persian Gulf, to help create new and durable security structures in a region regarded as vital to American national interests.

How might this have been done? The U.S. could have urged its Arab allies to introduce long-overdue reforms as a step toward legitimizing their regimes and broadening their domestic political support. At the very least, the U.S. might have urged the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council to end their decades of intramural feuding and forge a broader alliance with Jordan and Egypt. This, with American support, might have helped create a new balance of power in the region to counter the ambitions of adventurist regimes like Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

But nothing of the sort was ever considered in

AMIR TAHERI was the executive editor of *Khayan*, Iran's largest daily newspaper, from 1972 to 1979 and is a frequent contributor to publications in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. His last previous article in COMMENTARY was "Getting Serious About Iran: For Regime Change" (November 2006).

Washington. Instead, as Baker declared in September 1991, the administration would go for "the big thing": that is, finding a solution to the century-old conflict between the Jews and the Arabs. The result was the Madrid conference, an impressive show of heads of state but, as the decade's subsequent events would prove, a wholly counterproductive exercise in peacemaking.

The two key analytical assumptions that led to Madrid were, first, that the Arab-Israeli conflict was *the* issue, the Ur-issue, of Middle Eastern politics and, second, that all the other issues in the region were inextricably linked to it. Despite everything that has happened in the interim to disprove these two assumptions, they still underlie the thinking of diplomats today. Most recently, they were repeated almost word for word in the long-awaited report of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) headed by the very same James Baker.

Charged by the present Bush administration with finding ways to win the war in Iraq more quickly and at a lower cost in blood and treasure, the ISG found itself irresistibly drawn to the old notion of the Ur-issue. Evidently regarding the Bush Doctrine, with its diametrically opposed analysis, as too irrelevant even to merit mention, the ISG suggested instead that "solving" the Israel-Palestine dispute was the key to winning in Iraq.

In this, moreover, Baker and his team are hardly alone. Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, has long been of the same

mind. So too, apparently, is his successor Ban Ki-Moon, who told a South Korean newspaper that “If the issues in the conflict between Israel and Palestine [sic] go well, other issues in the Middle East . . . are likely to follow suit.”

That Arab despots should long have sought to divert their tyrannized subjects with dreams of driving the “Zionist enemy” into the sea is no surprise. Each time the late Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt faced social and political unrest at home, he would assure his own people and the Arab “nation” at large that social and political reform had to wait until “the enemy” was dislodged from “our beloved Palestine.” For a group of American “wise men” to embrace such retrograde and easily refuted notions bespeaks a truly dangerous ignorance of reality.

In fact, far from being the root cause of instability and war in the wider Middle East, one could argue that the Arab-Israeli conflict is rather peripheral, and that the region’s deeper and much more intractable problems lie elsewhere. And one would be right. In the last years we have all become acquainted with televised images of the brutal carnage that Shiites and Sunni are capable of inflicting on each other in Iraq, the ghastly work of Baathist death squads, the steady rhythm of political assassinations, and the laying waste of civilian life. And that is just within one country. For our purposes here, however, it may be more instructive to look at the Middle East at the regional level, and to examine in particular the huge number of interstate conflicts that have bedeviled this area in the modern era—conflicts that have nothing whatsoever to do with the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians.

COVERING A vast swath of territory between the Atlantic and Indian oceans, the “arc of crisis,” as British Prime Minister Tony Blair has accurately referred to the greater Middle East, consists of 22 states, sixteen of them Arab, plus Iran, Israel, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Few could be regarded as nation-states in classical European terms; all are remnants of various empires.

As such remnants, indeed, *none* of the states in the region enjoys fully defined or internationally recognized borders. Every one of them is engaged in pressing irredentist claims of one kind or another against one or more of its neighbors, and most have entered into armed battle with each other as a consequence. A brief tour of the region, proceeding roughly from east to west, yields a depressingly uniform catalog.

Afghanistan, to begin there, maintains a claim over neighboring Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province. This is the home of the Pathans, whose Pushtun kin form the largest ethnic bloc north of the colonial border fixed by Britain in the 19th century. In the 1960’s, the two neighbors fought a series of border wars over this province, which the Afghans call Pakhtunistan.

For its part, Pakistan has been engaged in a longstanding territorial dispute with India over the ownership of Kashmir, divided between the two in 1947 (with China snatching a portion for itself in 1960). The Indo-Pakistani conflict has led to three major wars and countless border clashes over the past half-century, and in part accounts for the determination of the two neighbors to develop their respective arsenals of nuclear weapons.

Pakistan is involved in a dispute with Iran as well—this one over territorial waters in the Arabian Sea as well as over the nationality of a number of Baluch tribes astraddle the international frontier. Iran, in turn, claims a right of supervision (*droit de regard*) in western Afghanistan based on the Paris Treaty of 1855. Iran and Afghanistan have likewise been in militant dispute for more than six decades over the waters of three border rivers, the Hirmand, the Parian, and the Harirud.

Then, on a much larger scale, there is the Iran-Iraq conflict. Between 1936 and 1974, these two neighbors fought a series of wars for control of the Shatt al-Arab border estuary. In 1975, they signed an accord to end the dispute, only to see the agreement declared null and void by Saddam Hussein in 1980. Invading Iran, he started a conflict that lasted eight years and claimed a million lives on both sides.

Since 2003, Iran has seized the opportunity presented by the fall of Saddam Hussein to redraw the border to its advantage. Iranian forces have gained control of Zaynalkosh, a strategic salient pointing to Baghdad like a gun. Iran has also revived a series of old accords with the former Ottoman empire, known as the Erzerum treaties, to claim a right of supervision over the Shiite holy shrines in present-day Iraq (Samara, Kazemayn, Karbala, Kufa, and Najaf).

Iran is in disputes elsewhere as well. To the south, it is trying to retain its hold over three strategically valuable islands near the Straits of Hormuz, through which passes each day half of the world’s exported oil. Iran seized these islands from Great Britain in 1971, just hours before the British ended their protectorate over the seven sheikh-doms that together form the United Arab Emirates (UAE). To

its north, Iran is fighting with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Azerbaijan over the Caspian Sea. These littoral neighbors want the territorial waters divided in accordance with the respective lengths of the five countries' coastlines, leaving Iran with only 10 percent of the sea's oil, gas, and fishing resources. Iran wants the Caspian to be divided equally among the five, thus doubling its share to 20 percent. Ever since 1995, it has taken action to underline its demands, creating a navy and preventing Western oil companies from exploring in Azerbaijani and Turkmen waters that Tehran regards as its own.

Iran has also acted to ensure its hold over the oil-rich province of Khuzestan, the object of a pan-Arab campaign to claim the region as part of the "Arab homeland." This territory, which did indeed boast an ethnic Arab majority until the late 1940's, has been steadily Persianized. Recently, in what amounts to an administrative ethnic cleansing, several Arab tribes living in areas close to the Iraqi border have been expelled, their members replaced by new arrivals, mostly from central Iran.

THAT THE Arabs of the Middle East have long regarded Iran as an alien power is true enough. But their preoccupation with Tehran has hardly deterred them from fighting bitterly among themselves as well. Quite the contrary.

Consider the six members of the inaptly named Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). All six are monarchies, often linked by tribal blood bonds, and four of them share a strong common interest as members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Nevertheless, in 1955, Saudi Arabia and the sultanate of Oman fought a war over the Buraimi Oasis, an area rumored to hold vast petroleum resources; decades of negotiation have failed to produce an accord. A third party in the same dispute is Abu Dhabi, the richest and most powerful of the entities forming the UAE. Last year the UAE publicly renounced a 1974 accord with Saudi Arabia over the oasis, thus opening the way for entering its own claim of sovereignty there.

Since the late 1990's, another GCC member, Qatar, has been quarreling with Saudi Arabia over the oil-rich area of Khor al-Udaid. In 2000, the Saudis expelled the last remaining Qatari garrison and formally annexed the area, thus cutting off Qatar's border with the UAE. Elsewhere, Qatar has been in dispute with its neighbor Bahrain, fighting a naval war in 2001 over control of the Hawar Islands. A more ancient dispute, this one

over the Zibarah tribes who live in the Qatar peninsula but claim loyalty to Bahrain, remains unresolved.

Even Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, arguably the GCC members enjoying the closest ties, have not managed to sort out their differences. Although they have agreed to share the oil resources in the so-called "neutral zone," a joint commission set up in 2006 failed to demarcate the two countries' frontiers there.

Kuwait's principal cause of concern, however, is not Saudi Arabia but Iraq. Although the Iraq-Kuwait border was internationally guaranteed in 1992-93 after the first Gulf war, many Kuwaitis still fear a return of the Iraqi "demons." And not without reason. Iraq's democratically elected parliament has yet to put aside Iraqi claims against the Kuwaiti islands of Warbah and Bubiyan as well as the southern portion of the Rumailah oilfields granted to Kuwait by the UN. The uncertainty has forced Kuwait to postpone its ambitious plans for developing Bubiyan into a free-trade zone; tourist projects in Warbah and in the nearby island of Failakah have also been frozen. To keep the Iraqis out, Kuwait has built a series of fortifications along the border, including electrified ditches, anti-tank traps, and a no-man's land at a depth of 10 miles. Saudi Arabia is building similar structures along its own border with Iraq.

Another dormant source of tension in the region is the old claim of suzerainty maintained by the Hashemite dynasty of Jordan over the Saudi province of Hejaz, where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located. The Hashemites have been careful to keep up relations with families in the province who suffered losses of land, power, and prestige when the al-Saud tribes drove out the Hashemites in 1924. Whenever the Saudi royal family comes under pressure from one or another of its many enemies, including al-Qaeda terrorists and Shiite militants in the eastern province, noises from Amman about a potentially independent Hejaz climb a notch higher.

In the past five years, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in settling its oldest and potentially most dangerous border dispute with Yemen, ceding to the latter more than 8,000 square kilometers of territory annexed in a 1936 war. But Yemen still has problems elsewhere. It has failed to define its borders with Oman along the Gulf of Hauf and the Rub al-Khali (or "empty quarter"), and it fought a war against Eritrea in 1999 over the Hanish islands in the Red Sea, a strategically valuable archipelago that could create a chokepoint in one of the world's

busiest shipping lanes. As for the vicious spectacle presented by Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia, that deserves an essay unto itself.

THE LIST continues. Ever since the 1940's, both Iraq and Syria have pursued irredentist claims against Turkey, accusing that country of denying them their fair share of the waters of the Euphrates. More importantly, both Syria and Iraq claim the Turkish province of Iskanderun, where ethnic Arabs account for some 30 percent of the population. For its part, Turkey, basing itself on the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, claims a right of supervision in northern Iraq, especially over the two oil-rich areas around Mosul and Kirkuk, and it has recruited, trained, and armed tribal Turkmen groups there. For much of the 1990's, Turkey also intervened militarily in northern Iraq in pursuit of its war against the Marxist Kurdish guerrillas known as the PKK.

As for Syria, it most notoriously claims the entirety of Lebanon as part of "Greater Syria" (a fictitious unit that supposedly includes not only historical Palestine but also parts of what is now the kingdom of Jordan). For almost three of the five decades of Lebanon's history as an independent state, Syria maintained an army of occupation there, and it has been involved in provoking and prolonging all three of Lebanon's civil wars, including the longest one from 1975 to 1991. By dragging Lebanon into the broader conflicts of the region, Syria has been partly responsible for the deaths of an estimated 100,000 Lebanese and the flight of more than 2.5 million more. Last summer, Syria and its principal ally, Iran's Islamic Republic, encouraged the Lebanese branch of Hizballah to trigger a five-week war with Israel, and then to attempt to destroy Lebanon's democratically elected government through street agitation and political assassinations.

This brings us to Egypt, the most populous of the Arab states and one that has always vacillated between a policy of distancing itself from "the Arab mess," as the nationalist premier Nahas Pasha liked to call it, and carving out an empire for itself in the name of pan-Arabism. For much of the 1950's and 1960's, Egypt under Nasser was in an empire-building mode. It created the United Arab Republic, to which Syria and, more briefly, Libya and Iraq were attached. It also did much to foment and prolong the 1958-1962 war in Algeria, partly within a grander, Soviet-backed scheme to keep the French army, the largest NATO force in Europe at the time, pinned down for as long as possible.

In the 1960's, in the name of pan-Arabism, Egypt supported the military coup d'état in Yemen that led to a six-year civil war there. By 1962, an Egyptian expeditionary army of 60,000 men was fighting the forces of the deposed Yemeni imam. Over 200,000 people died in that war, including some 30,000 Egyptians.

Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war against Israel ended Nasser's Yemeni adventure. Even so, however, he could not refrain from throwing Egypt's weight behind the radical regime in the newly independent state of South Yemen, which was to become the only Arab country to build a thoroughgoing Communist system. With Egypt's help, South Yemen became a major cold-war base for the Soviet Union, offering it naval facilities in Aden, Mukalla, and the island of Socotra. From 1969 until the mid-1970's, South Yemen was also a base of aggression against Oman, as Marxist rebels from the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf tried to seize control of the Omani province of Dhofar with the help of Cuban and East German military experts. That war claimed over 100,000 lives and produced almost a half-million refugees on both sides of the border.

More recently, Egypt has flexed its muscles against Sudan, annexing chunks of Sudanese territory known as the Halaieb, home to the trans-border Bashara tribes. On its other side, Egypt has engaged in intermittent conflict with Muammar Qaddafi's Libya over an area of the Egyptian desert. Indeed, the great irony is that the only neighbor with whom Egypt enjoys demarcated and internationally recognized borders is Israel.

Libya, too, has been involved in territorial disputes—with Chad, Sudan, and Tunisia. In the case of Chad, Libyan claims led to a decade-long war in the 1970's and 1980's that at one point drew in French forces on the Chadian side. In the case of Sudan, the point at issue is Khartoum's support for Islamist guerrillas fighting Qaddafi on his home turf of Tripoli.

Further to the west, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania have been locked in a triangular struggle over the former Spanish Sahara, which Morocco annexed in 1975 with financial and military help from the Shah of Iran. In retaliation, Algeria has set up and supported the Polisario front that claims to be the legitimate government of the Saharaoui people. Most Arab and African states recognize the Polisario claim, despite Morocco's protests, and a low-intensity war that started in 1976 has continued ever since.

In 1992, the UN asked none other than James

Baker to mediate an agreement on the Sahara. Eight years later, America's "diplomatic wizard" threw in the towel, having failed to bring the disputants an inch closer to agreement. In the 1990's, Morocco repaid Algeria for its support of the Polisario by turning a blind eye to Islamist terrorists waging a bloody campaign in Algeria that claimed over 250,000 lives.

THIS PROVIDES only the briefest glimpse into one aspect of reality in the "arc of crisis." All told, in the past six decades, this region has witnessed no fewer than 22 full-scale wars over territory and resources, not one of them having anything to do with Israel and the Palestinians. And these international disputes, as I mentioned at the outset, are quite apart from the uninterrupted string of domestic clashes, military coups, acts of sectarian and ethnic vengeance, factional terrorism, and other internal conflicts that have characterized the greater Middle East, not infrequently attaining impressive heights of cruelty and despoliation. Nor is that the end of it. Underlying all of this are the un-moving facts, documented at length in the annual volumes of the Arab Human Development Report, of chronic instability, severe economic underachievement, social atrophy, and cultural backwardness. The greater Middle East is the only part of the world still largely untouched by the wave of positive change that followed the end of the cold war.

The notion that all of these problems can be waved away by "solving" the Arab-Israeli conflict is thus at best a delusion, at worst a recipe for maintaining today's wider political, diplomatic, and social paralysis. For what is the reason behind the failure of the 1991 Madrid conference, the slow but steady death of the 1993 Oslo accords, the collapse of President Bill Clinton's final effort to negotiate a peace deal at Camp David in 2000, and the faltering history of President George W. Bush's "road map"? The reason is hardly the want of diplomatic efforts, especially on the part of the United States. No, the reason lies elsewhere, and is plain to see in the sorry tale we have rehearsed.

It is this: with the exception of Israel and with the partial exception of Turkey, the entire Middle East lacks a culture of conflict resolution, let alone the necessary mechanisms of meaningful compromise. Such a culture can only be shaped through a process of democratization. Only democracies habitually resolve their conflicts through diplomacy rather than war, and only popular-based regimes possess the political strength and the moral will to build peace. This is why, unless we mean to consign the Middle East back to the "swamps" from which the United States, its allies, and the region's reformers have been seeking to extricate it, democratization remains the only credible strategy in and for the "arc of crisis," and the only hope for its suffering inhabitants.