

# ON THE ROAD TO PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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***Abstract:** Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November of 1977 appears to be a hopeful event, signaling the departure from negative Arab behavior towards Israel. For Egypt, a prospective peace with Israel offers the opportunity to pay real attention to their problems at home, instead of focusing on foreign issues. Egypt has experienced riots all across the country due to increased military spending and negligence towards citizens' needs. No matter the motive for seeking peace with Israel, this is an admirable move by Sadat, and if there is to be longstanding peace in the region, other Arab states should follow. The United States will also have to play a vital role if there is to be peace. The US should act as a mediator between the parties, while being careful not to advocate for any side. Currently, the Carter Administration's policies have lacked consistency on this issue. They need to develop an intermediary stance, and work with both sides to facilitate peace. However, Carter can only do this if the Arab states agree to work with them as well.*

The dramatic initiative of President Sadat of Egypt in going to Jerusalem in November 1977, speaking before the Israeli Knesset, and setting in motion, at least temporarily, a new round of negotiations on the Arab-Israeli conflict has not itself altered the existence and perpetuation of that conflict. The essence of the conflict remains the unyielding, implacable refusal of the Arab states in general to recognize the Jewish right to self-determination and a state of their own and an Arab unwillingness to accept Israel as a member of the family of nation-states in the Middle East. Other issues, including those of territorial jurisdiction and the destiny of the Palestinian Arabs, though important themselves, have surfaced as a result of the four wars which occurred due to the general refusal over a thirty-year period to acknowledge Israel's existence and security needs. This refusal, exacerbated by the acute divisions and bitter rivalries among the Arab countries, the unrelenting intransigence of the Palestine Liberation Organization in calling for the elimination of the state of Israel in its National Charter and Covenant, and the differing interests and involvements of the two superpowers<sup>1</sup>, has always in the past made a peaceful settlement difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.<sup>2</sup>

The action by President Sadat in November therefore appeared to be a hopeful departure from the negative pattern of behavior the Arabs have exhibited for thirty years. Sadat has been rightfully applauded for this courageous and pioneering act. It is appropriate that the first step toward a constructive dialogue between Israel and the Arab states should come from a country that has suffered 100,000 casualties and wasted £40 billion in wars against Israel. Egypt, a country with an illiterate population of 70 percent, a per capita yearly income of about \$325, and a foreign debt of \$13 billion, experienced rioting all over the country when increases in food prices were announced in January 1977, yet allocated 25 percent of its budget to military

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<sup>1</sup> Blema Steinberg, "Superpower Conceptions of Peace in the Middle East," *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, 2 (Summer 1977), pp. 67-96.

<sup>2</sup> Yehoshafat Harkabi *Arab Strategies and Israel's Response* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

purposes in 1977. A prospective peace with Israel clearly offers the possibility of enabling Egypt to pay real attention to unfulfilled aspirations and economic problems confronting her today.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of his motives, Sadat has earned admiration for his gesture. The Egyptian leader, who for years has been declaring that it would be left to the next generation to decide on the possibility of normalization of relations with Israel and who, in mid-1977 unexpectedly reduced the time for decision on the issue to five years, appeared in Jerusalem in November, having changed his position, proclaiming, "we welcome you to live among us in peace." His implicit recognition of the state of Israel, his stated genuine desire to achieve a resolution of the conflict by peaceful means and his renunciation of war as a solution can both be accepted at face value. However, due to the euphoric atmosphere generated by Sadat's visit, less attention was paid to his main two demands. The first was that "we insist on complete withdrawal" from Arab territories, including Arab Jerusalem. The second was "the achievement of the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to establish their own state." Sadat had already made the same demands in a speech on November 8, 1977 and already knew of Prime Minister Begin's rejection the following day of this extreme formulation of the Arab position.

The Jerusalem visit was followed by a meeting of Sadat and Begin in Ismailia on December 25 and 26. Sadat himself stated that at the meeting "Begin announced that everything was negotiable and open to discussion... Moshe Dayan was flexible in the talks."<sup>4</sup> Two ministerial committees, one on politics to meet in Jerusalem and the other on military affairs to meet in Cairo, were established and began deliberations.

As astonishing and dramatic as Sadat's initiative in going to Jerusalem was, his suspension of these talks on January 18, when five of the seven sections of a draft joint statement of the principles had been approved, was even more surprising. The impulsiveness of Sadat's action, which startled even his own foreign minister, may have arisen from a number of motives. Sadat himself, like the rest of the world, may have been swept up by the mood of the euphoria produced by his visit and consequently became chagrined at the realization that his demands were not automatically acceptable and that agreement between the parties would not be easily reached. His action may have resulted from the personal pique occasioned by the somewhat undiplomatic response by Prime Minister Mohammed Kamel. Sadat's act may have been a matter of policy in an attempt to get the United States to apply pressure on Israel to change its negotiating posture or to lay the foundation for a more effective claim for arms supplies from the U.S. It may have resulted from the differences inherent in the decision-making process of the two political systems which arose from the fact that policy formulated by one individual in one system was likely to be more personal and easier to change than that which was the outcome of deliberation by the members of a coalition government. Perhaps most significant of all for Sadat was the dawning awareness that the logic of events might oblige him to sign a unilateral agreement with Israel which other Arab states would refuse to endorse.

The Egyptian President now experienced what Israelis have endured for so long: the refusal of Arab leaders to participate in face-to-face negotiations with Israel. He could understand the refusal of the Arab states to meet with him to discuss his visit to Israel, but he must have been distressed by the Tripoli summit meeting of Syria, Libya, Algeria, South Yemen, and the P.L.O.—with Iraq, regarding even this as too moderate a response—which rejected any participation in a peace conference, accused him of high treason, and declared that his initiative

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<sup>3</sup> Lance Taylor, "The Political Economy of Egypt: An Opening to What?" Unpublished paper delivered at the American Economic Association meeting, New York, December 28, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> *October Magazine*, Cairo, January 1, 1978.

would "tilt the international balance in favor of the Zionist and imperialistic forces and infringe on the national independence of the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America." Equally as distressing was the refusal of King Hussein of Jordan, in his usual opportunistic fashion, to join the talks unless there was a prior unconditional acceptance by Israel of his demands, which include not only withdrawal of Israeli forces, but also the return of the Arab refugees of the 1948-49 war and the placing of East Jerusalem under Arab sovereignty.

President Sadat explained the recall of his political delegation from the meetings in Jerusalem by declaring that his two conditions—total withdrawal by Israel and implementation of "the rights of the Palestinians," which in its new phraseology became self-determination for the Palestinians—had not been accepted. The different perspectives taken by the two sides indicate the measure of their disagreement. While Israel, after thirty years of war, wanted peace and security, the Arabs demanded control of former Arab territory and justice for the Palestinian Arabs. At Ismailia on Christmas Day, Begin presented a detailed and comprehensive peace plan. If Sadat had taken a personal risk by his peace initiative and his implicit recognition of the state of Israel, as the sad events at Larnaca airport in Cyprus were to show, Begin had taken a national risk for peace by immediately agreeing to withdrawal from certain territory. Yet Sadat complained, "Begin gave me nothing. I gave him everything."

The Sadat position suffers from two deficiencies. The first is his insistence on preconditions before any real negotiations can take place. Praiseworthy though Sadat's initiative may have been, it does not entitle him to automatic acceptance of his demands. Rather, it must be seen as the starting point of a process of complex negotiations in which compromise formulae must be found. The second deficiency is his minimization of the Begin peace plan. The Israeli Prime Minister proposed the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Sinai and the acknowledgment of Egyptian sovereignty over it. His 26-point plan for the West Bank and Gaza included abolition of Israeli military government and the establishment of self-rule. At their introduction, the Begin proposals were regarded by President Carter as a good basis for negotiation and by Secretary of State Vance as "a notable contribution" and "a constructive approach."

After a brief period of enthusiasm, the road to peace appears to be as rocky as ever. An underlying problem is that the Egyptian-Israeli dialogue is operative on two levels, bilateral and comprehensive, at the same time. The formula for bilateral agreement between Egypt and Israel, in the absence of issues extraneous to Egyptian territory or Israeli security, is readily available. In direct negotiations both sides can agree on demilitarization in Sinai, on limited force zones in the area, on early warning systems, on free navigation through the Suez Canal and in the Gulf of Aqaba, and on a joint committee to resolve the outstanding problems. But Sadat believes himself to be constrained by external Arab factors. In this view, and in the absence of Syria, Palestinian moderates, and above all, Jordan from the negotiating process, neither a bilateral nor a comprehensive settlement of the conflict can be reached, nor even a set of principles upon which a settlement can be based. An essential and minimum requirement for progress in the negotiations is that Jordan be persuaded to participate in them and help solve the issue of the Palestinian Arabs.

Two further problems have affected the intermittent nature of the negotiations. One is the arms package deal formulated by the Carter administration, which Secretary of State Vance argued has to be seen in the context of both the negotiating process and the objective of a peace settlement. The second is the more intricate, complex, and divisive issue of Israeli settlements in occupied territory.

The February 1978, \$4.8 billion proposal of 60 F-15 fighter bombers for Saudi Arabia, 50 F-5 fighters for Egypt, and 15 F-15 and 75 F-16 planes for Israel, is regarded by Vance as a package which must be accepted or rejected as a whole by congress. The challenge to Congress in this fashion occasions a degree of concern, if not alarm. President Sadat has complained of the "arrogance" of Prime Minister Begin, resulting from the present Israeli possession of American weapons, and has argued that Egypt should acquire "equivalent bargaining power" by the provision of similar weapons of its own. Saudi Arabia has made clear it feels it is owed American weapons of the most sophisticated kind and has selected the F-15, the most advanced combat plane in the world. The proposed package seems therefore to be a material rather than a symbolic tribute to President Sadat for his policy of seeking a peaceful solution of the conflict and his promise to continue the negotiating process, and a reward for the economic and political role played in recent years by Saudi Arabia. It would supposedly bolster the forces working for a settlement.

The Vance proposal should be seen not in a vacuum but in the context of the familiar asymmetrical relationship of the two sides to the conflict. Israel has been wholly dependent on the supply of American arms and on those which it can produce itself. The Arab confrontation states have been amply provided with arms not only from the United States but also from Western Europe, and particularly from the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Syria has received at least \$1 billion in Soviet arms, including 50 MIG-23 fighter bombers, 140 MIG-21 fighters, 20 Sukhoi fighter bombers, 15 surface to-air-missile batteries, T-62 tanks, Scud missiles, and armored personnel carriers. Iraq has received \$4 billion in Soviet arms and Libya has more than 1300 Soviet tanks and 20 MIG-23 aircraft.

Egypt has an arsenal of 30 MIG planes, Scud missiles, Frog missile launchers, and 1000 tanks, and has ordered from France 14 Mirage V fighter bombers and 40 Mirage F-1 fighters, in addition to the 44 it already possesses.

From France and Britain, Egypt is now obtaining surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank missiles, patrol boats, and service aircraft. Egypt already possesses 20 C-130 U.S. transport planes, but the F-5, which Sadat has incorrectly described as "a tenth-rate plane," will be the first combat aircraft supplied by the U.S. Even if one admits that F-5 is not as important as the F-15 or F-16, it still requires U.S. technical infrastructure (command channels, etc.) that makes Egypt prepared to receive U.S. equipment and weapons given to other Arab countries.

Saudi Arabia has already spent \$12 billion on U.S. arms and military infrastructure in the last four years. Its weaponry includes 110 F-5E fighters, 250 M-60 battle tanks, 400 Maverick air-to-surface missiles, 6 batteries of Hawk surface-to-air missiles, and 2000 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, as well as 300 French AMX tanks. Saudi Arabia is rapidly building a military complex at Tabuk which is well within F-15 range of Israel. The U.S. may have accepted the Saudi argument that the new planes are necessary to defend its oil fields and to protect itself against Iraq, South Yemen, or any other potential enemies. But the new Tabuk complex is located 900 miles northwest of the oil fields and only 125 miles from Israel. It is difficult to see how it can be rationally regarded as an appropriate base for its purported functions. The U.S. may see the F-15's as token appreciation of Saudi political moderation, willingness to increase oil production, and efforts to minimize the rise in oil prices, or it may have deferred to Saudi Arabian perception of the delivery of the planes as the test of the mutual relationship. Yet, at the same time the U.S. may have set in motion a dangerous process of military escalation. The

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<sup>5</sup> Sources: *International Defense Review*, Geneva, August 1976; Institute of Strategic Studies, London, report, 1977-78.

Administration has, for the first time, proposed providing Saudi Arabia with advanced weaponry which can destroy aircraft far from its borders and which, in spite of technical difficulties, can be transferred in the event of war to other Arab states, as 38 Libyan Mirages were sent to Egypt in 1973, though this was contrary to French policy.

There are a number of troubling thoughts in this regard. If one of the motives of the U.S. in providing the planes for Egypt was to encourage it to continue the round of negotiations, this may be counterproductive because the prize of weapons, which Sadat has been seeking so assiduously, was agreed to at a very early stage in the process. Moreover, honoring peacefully-intended rational policy would seem to suggest further economic assistance rather than arms for Egypt. The U.S., which has already provided Egypt with over \$4 billion in economic aid since 1973, helped clear the Suez Canal, aided the reconstruction of Suez cities, and could foster the mood for and increase the desirability of peace more readily by continuation of such aid.

The Administration may also have misperceived reality by ignoring or dismissing the role of Saudi Arabia as a confrontation state and regarding it simply as an interested party. In fact, the stronger role of the Saudis is evident in a number of ways. Saudi forces were sent to Jordan in both the 1967 and 1973 wars, though they apparently did not engage in battle. The Saudi brigade sent to fight in the Golan Heights in 1973 did not pull out until 1974. In December 1975, Saudi forces, with American weapons, joined Syrian troops in Joint exercises in the Golan Heights to rehearse the recapture of lost Syrian Territory. The Saudis have made no secret of their intentions to assist in any future war. In 1976 King Khalid said:

When we build up our military strength we have no aims against anybody, except those who took by force our lands and our shrines in Jerusalem—and we know who that is... The strength of Saudi Arabia is a strength for the whole Arab and Islamic world. We always intended to make use of all military equipment that might help build our military strength.

On December 5, 1974, the Saudi Defense Minister stated, “All we own is at the disposal of the Arab nation and will be used in the battle against the common enemy.” For many years the Saudis have financed the arms purchases of a number of Arab States. The use of an oil embargo in 1973 and the constant threat to use it again in appropriate circumstances against any supporter of Israel can be regarded as war by other means. Sheik Yamani himself, in a speech at the University of Edinburgh in November, 1976, said that within the Arab camp “the most extreme saw the embargo as a punitive measure and an instrument of revenge, whereas the most reasonable and rational saw it as a means of attracting the attention of Western nations and governments to the Palestinian problem and the Israeli occupation of Arab lands.” Moreover, the stress which Saudi Arabia places on the significance of the worldwide economic boycott against Israel, and in its secondary and tertiary aspects against Jews in general, makes it a leader even among the confrontation states.<sup>6</sup> The Administration has ignored the possibility that American technicians, accompanying the new planes and other hardware, may be dragged into compromising or dangerous situations.

The increased Saudi military might constitute a new threat to the southern borders of Israel and to navigation in the Red Sea. The Saudi strength in frontline planes will be greater than that of Israel. The necessary diversion of Israeli forces from other fronts to defend the country against a possible Saudi attack inevitably weakens Israeli defense. For Israel, the

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Nelson and Terrence Prittie, *The Economic War Against the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1977).

package deal not only changes the nature of the security problem but has also, unfortunately, led to the questioning of the reliability of American commitments. In the previous Administration, Israel had been denied promised concussion bombs by President Ford. The new proposal is a violation of the 1975 agreements, when Israel accepted the Sinai II arrangements, by which Israel was promised 50 F-15's, and expected 150 F-16's.

The equity of the proposed package must be examined in the sober light of reality rather than fanciful euphoria. It is not obvious that the package deal is a useful contribution either to the negotiation process or to American national interest in general. Nor is it correct to argue that the Arab states will automatically turn to other suppliers if the American weapons are not provided. It is acknowledged that the F-15 plane is a much better product than the French Mirage, and it is improbable that the wealthy Arab states will settle for less than the best.

A major divisive issue, both within Israel and between Israel and the United States, is that of the settlements in occupied territory, which Secretary Vance argued in February 1978 "violate international law" and should not exist, and which President Carter regards as an obstacle to peace. For purposes of analysis, the Sinai settlements can be separated from the others.

These settlements, containing 1500 people, are located in the Rafah corridor, which comprises about two percent of the total area of Sinai, which is itself about six percent of the whole of Egyptian territory. Historically, the corridor has been the land route for both peaceful and military purposes from Egypt to the Middle East land mass. Many of the critical battles were fought there in the four Arab-Israeli wars and it was also the area from which Israeli troops withdrew after the 1949 and 1956 wars. Israeli withdrawal, under American pressure in the latter case, was followed almost immediately by the entrance of Egyptian troops and the start of fedayeen raids into Israel. Sinai can scarcely be regarded as territory which is sacred or historically significant to Egypt. It is only seventy years since Britain imposed the Rafah-Aqaba line on the Turks as a border; only in 1917 was the territory formally annexed to Egypt by British policy. Until 1967 there was almost no Egyptian development of the area except for military bases.

The existing Israeli civil settlements, providing security for Israel by blocking access to the territory for potentially hostile military forces or for terrorists, do not challenge the sovereignty of Egypt over the area. Reconciliation between that sovereignty acknowledged by Israel and the existence of the settlements if devoid of military personnel, does not in itself appear difficult to reach. Paradoxically, such reconciliation may have been made more difficult by the strong statements of Secretary Vance, which suggest incompatibility with the position the U.S. occupies and the role as mediator in these delicate issues which the U.S. currently plays. Indeed, the case might be made that the doctrine in international law of *uti possidetis*, the maintenance of the cease fire status quo until peace negotiations are completed, might provide a legal basis for the control of territory and could at least render the Vance position subject to dispute.

A similar case can be made for the settlements, containing 3700 people, in the Golan Heights, where security is clearly the dominating concern for Israel. The settlements in the West Bank and Gaza present a more complicated problem because they are related not simply to the desire for security, as those in the Jordan Valley are, but also to the final political disposition of the area.

It is arguable whether the 1949 Geneva Convention, which forbade voluntary transfer of population and which stems from the revulsion against the Nazis' forcible transfer of population, is pertinent to the existence of these settlements. Unlike Sinai and the Golan Heights, the West

Bank is an area in which Jewish residents have lived for centuries. By the 1947 U.N. Partition Plan, Jewish settlements were to remain under the anticipated new Arab political structure. But all were eliminated as a result of the 1948-49 war. Some of the settlements, in Gush Etzion, Hebron, and the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, are thus de facto returning to their old habit.<sup>7</sup> The question of sovereignty of the area remains open, regardless of the settlements. The formal annexation of the territory by Jordan in 1950 was accepted by only two states, Britain and Pakistan. The disposition of the settlements thus depends on the resolution of the political destiny of the area. What is needed now, as Abba Eban has recently written in his autobiography, is “an effort at innovation, not of memory.”<sup>8</sup>

That effort will not be made easier by the incessant Arab repetition of the demand of implementation of “the legitimate rights of the Palestinians”, always left in an undefined, imprecise fashion, or by the Arab refusal to begin negotiations until Israel has unconditionally accepted the demand. More recently, the Arab position has been argued in terms of the necessity for self-determination by the Palestinians or for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Arab view is that the Palestinian Arabs are the central element of the whole Arab-Israeli conflict. But to accept this position is to deny the possibility of any peaceful resolution of the problem. Humanitarian concern for the Palestinian Arabs is understandable, and the need to find an acceptable political formula to solve the problem is crucial. But to search for that formula in the absence of a perceived willingness by the Arab leaders to coexist with an Israel with secure and recognized borders and with a population accepted on an equal basis as fellow Palestinians, through predominantly Jewish, is a pointless and vain undertaking. The very use of the word Palestinian to refer to the Arab population suggests the denial of the existence of a Palestinian Jewry.

Resolution of the conflict requires correct definition of “Palestine” and of the people or peoples who can legitimately be regarded as citizens of such an area. It also requires a decision on whether Palestinian Arabs are to be regarded primarily as nationals of an area or as members of the wider Arab nation now consisting of some 130 million. The primary difficulty in providing a universally acceptable definition is that “Palestine” has never been an independent geo-political entity since biblical times, when it was under Jewish control. The only proper definition in the contemporary world is that of the 1922 Mandate, given by the League of Nations to Great Britain, which included the territories of what are now the states of Jordan and Israel, and the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>9</sup> The Arab formulation of “Palestinian self-determination” or “legitimate rights” has never clarified whether it is applicable to the whole original Mandate area of 44,000 square miles or that part of it which is west of the Jordan River, which includes Israel and which is about 10,000 square miles, or to the present West Bank and Gaza territory of about 2300 square miles.

The demand for a Palestinian Arab homeland or state ignores that such a state in fact is already in existence. If one defines the character of a state by the majority of its inhabitants, Jordan, with a population about 55 percent Palestinian, could logically be regarded as a Palestinian state or homeland. From 1948 to 1967, when the West Bank and Gaza were under Jordanian control, there was no demand for the creation of an independent Palestinian state. It may well be that the conviction of a Palestinian nationalism has grown in strength in the last decade and constitutes a significant new factor in the maelstrom of Middle East politics.

<sup>7</sup> Msgr. John Osterreicher and Anne Sinai, eds., Jerusalem (New York: Day, 1974). pp. 137-47.

<sup>8</sup> Abba Eban, *An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Memertzhagen, *Middle East Diary, 1917-1956* (New York: Yoseloff, 1959).

Caution on this matter is advisable for two reasons. The first is the inherent ambiguity in Arab self-definition. The first article of the 1968 Palestinian National Covenant states that "the people of Palestine is a part of the Arab Nation." One might reasonably conclude from this that the Palestinian Arab people can be regarded as citizens of any Arab state in which they reside. Secondly, the assertion of self-determination ought to relate to some specific territory and to be framed in a way that does not suggest the elimination of an already existing state. In the same Covenant, Article II states that "Palestine with its boundaries that existed at the time of the British Mandate is an integral regional unit." Again, the logic of such a declaration suggests the elimination of the present state of Israel or of Jordan or both. The role of the Administration in calling at different times for "a Palestinian homeland" and for "Palestinians to participate in their own self-determination" has perpetuated the ambiguity rather than helped clarify the problem.

In principle it is justifiable that the inhabitants of an area should possess political autonomy or be given the opportunity to rule themselves. But such a right is not self-evident if its implementation does violence to others. Under present conditions, the case is clearer for a West Bank and Gaza entity to be associated with Jordan in some federal relationship than for a separate state to be established. This conclusion arises from a number of factors. A small and densely-populated state would constitute a danger to security for both Israel and Jordan. This would certainly be the case if the state were controlled by extremists who view the creation of such a state as a prelude to further expansion. The dominant feature of the Palestinian Covenant is the call for the destruction of Israel. Every prominent leader of the P.L.O. has called for the continuation of the struggle until the whole of Palestinian soil is retrieved. From an economic point of view, it is arguable whether such a state could be viable. There would be a real possibility that the Soviet Union, by economic as well as military assistance, might strengthen its influence in the area. Recent actions by the Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa strengthen this possibility. It is not coincidental that the Soviet Union, while supporting the existence of an Israel with sovereignty over the June 4, 1967 borders, also strongly advocates the creation of a Palestinian Arab state in the West Bank and Gaza which would almost certainly depend on it for support and which would help perpetuate Arab-Israeli differences. Moreover, the creation of such a state does not address itself to the refugee problem as a whole; the refugees who left what is now Israel in 1948 might find the establishment of such a state in the West Bank and Gaza purposeless.

The problems inherent in the creation of a 22nd Arab state, as well as the general difficulties in the resolution of the whole conflict, are compounded by the presence of an intransigent P.L.O alternating terrorist activity with political bombast in an uncompromising manner. The myth of the moderation of the P.L.O, accepted by part of the Washington political elite, has been dispelled by the rejection of such moderation at the leadership meetings in March and August 1977, and by the adherence to basic objectives of the Palestinian Covenant, which include the destruction of Israel.<sup>10</sup>

What is the role of the U.S in the Middle East today? Recent statements by the State Department<sup>11</sup> argue that U.S. must take into account terrorism, the support around the world for Palestinian nationalism, oil supplies, oil revenues and capital holdings by the Arab oil producing countries, the fact that Saudi Arabia and Algeria are "organizers of the poorer nations," and the growing economic market in the Middle East, as well as the needs of Israel. Essentially there are

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Curtis, "The Myth of the Moderation of the PLO," *Bulletin of APPME* (October 1977), P. 2

<sup>11</sup> Speech by Harold H. Saunders, Acting Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, in Washington, D.C., February 28, 1978

seven major concerns for the U.S. in the Middle East: desire for peace and stability in the area, upholding the long-term commitment to the survival of Israel, assuring the flow of Middle Eastern oil to itself and to the industrialized world in general, maintaining good relations with the moderate Arab countries and fostering trade with them, avoiding confrontation with the Soviet Union, preserving its own influence in the area, and helping mediate a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The upholding of the commitment to Israel has been of mutual benefit. The existence of a strong Israel, with a deep underlying national consensus, has provided a unique element of stability in the kaleidoscopic politics of the Middle East, where the nature of regimes in general is dependent on one individual or an elite group. President Sadat himself has acknowledged that his view of Egyptian-Israeli relations may not be shared by his successors. For the U.S., the stability of Israel constitutes the essential basis on which its influence in the area rests. Certainly, it would be premature for the U.S. to base long-term policy in the area on conditions which may exist only temporarily; rulers have an uncertain hold on power and the states engage in constantly changing rivalries and divisions, of which the civil war in Lebanon has been only the most recent example. It is the strength and stability of Israel that has helped the U.S. preserve its facilities in Oman and Bahrain to counter the Soviet bases in South Yemen and in East Africa. It can even be argued that the full economic cost of Middle East oil might be considerably greater if Saudi Arabia were not aware of the political advantages of U.S. pressure on Israel in return for moderation in the rise in oil prices. Moreover, in an age when political liberty and democratic political systems are a rare and precious commodity, the preservation and strengthening of the only democratic state in the Middle East, and a highly successful state at that, is an increasingly significant moral imperative for the U.S. In Israel Mrs. Carter does not have to dine separately from or walk behind the President as she was obliged to do on the recent Presidential visit to the Middle East.

The upholding of this material and moral commitment to Israel is not incompatible with the existence of friendly relationships with the Arab countries or with the desire to increase trade with them. This is particularly true concerning relations with the moderate countries in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula area. The expansion of trade with the Arab oil-producing countries in recent years has been considerable. In 1972 U.S. exports to these countries amounted to \$3.2 billion; in 1976 they increased to \$13 billion. Although the Soviet Union approved the Arab oil embargo instituted at the Yom Kippur war in 1973, and hoped for both political advantage and economic benefit as a result, the oil-producing states maintained both their trade ties with the West and their political opposition to the Soviet Union. Ironically, the Soviet Union has been among the nations most affected by the inflation produced in the Western countries because of the dramatic rise in oil prices.

It is futile to deny the danger to the U.S. and all the other industrial countries of their dependence on Arab oil. In 1973, Arab oil constituted 22 percent of oil imports; by 1976 the proportion had risen to 38 percent. But this increase does not necessitate American economic dependence on Saudi Arabia nor acquiescence towards its political views in the Middle East or elsewhere. The Administration has not yet fully appreciated that Saudi Arabia, with its considerable investments, bank deposits, commercial holdings in the U.S., and present and committed trade contracts with American business, is now more dependent on and concerned for the economic prosperity of the U.S. than ever before. From an economic point of view, it would be fair to conclude that Saudi Arabia needs the U.S. as much as, if not more, than the U.S. needs Saudi Arabia. Moreover, not only Saudi Arabian economic development, but also its military

structure has been dependent on American supplies. Its protection from outside intervention has, to a large degree, resulted from American friendship. That friendship would quickly be ended by another oil embargo like that of 1973. The U.S. has not yet made it sufficiently clear that there are limits to Arab oil power. The presence of a strong Israel in 1967 prevented Nasser's scheme for controlling the peninsula oil, through his military operation in Yemen, from succeeding. Similarly, in 1970 Israel prevented Syria from invading Jordan and possibly blocking access to the oil fields. The maintenance of Israel will help the assistance of Saudi Arabia from possible threats by the Soviet Union or other powers. Protection from internal subversion or from Yemen or Iraq is possible only by cooperation with the U.S.

The U.S. has necessarily been asked to mediate in a situation where no other state can, since the General Assembly of the United Nations has been discredited as biased due to its unceasing attacks on Israel. The U.S. has abided by Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 which articulate the principles upon which a general settlement of the conflict can be reached: withdrawal by Israel from occupied territory, acceptance by the Arabs of an Israel with secure and recognized borders, free navigation in the area, and a solution to the refugee problem. The U.S. has alternated in the stress it places on either the search for a comprehensive settlement or partial accords, and wavered in the degree of support for the Israeli position. This is a result of the multiple objectives which American policy pursues. Unlike the Soviet Union, which for over twenty years has maintained its military, economic and political support for the Arab position and shown no interest in ameliorating relations with Israel, with which it has broken diplomatic relations, the U.S. has been concerned with maintaining or expanding its influence in the Arab states while maintaining support for Israel at the same time.

The equivocation in the American Position has been more pronounced since 1969, when Secretary of State Rogers introduced his two plans based on "even-handedness" and when Israel was refused the Phantom jets it wanted. During the Yom Kippur war, it was only after the rapid and enormous military re-equipping of the Arab armies by the Soviet Union that the U.S. began to send vital supplies to Israel. It was the extraordinary Israeli military resurgence and strength that allowed Secretary Kissinger to conclude the shuttle, step-by-step negotiations which led to the three partial accords which constitute his major diplomatic achievement.

More recently, the Carter Administration has adopted an even more equivocal position, while its policy on Middle Eastern matters has seemed to lack consistency and clarity. It has wavered on the interpretation given to Resolution 242. From an assertion that the Resolution did not require total withdrawal by Israel, it has retreated to a view that it "neither endorses nor excludes the June 4, 1967 line as the final political border," and a declaration that withdrawal on all three fronts was essential. In October 1977 the U.S. was implying that the P.L.O. might be brought into the discussion of a settlement. In 1967 Israel suffered from the failure of the U.S. to honor its commitment of 1957 when Nasser denied the Israelis the right to navigate the Straights of Tiran. In October 1977, the Carter Administration similarly refused to abide by the commitments made in December 1973 and September 1975 in which the U.S. promised to oppose P.L.O. participation in the Geneva conference as long as that organization refused to recognize Israel or accept 242 as the basis of negotiations, and agreed to "consult freely" and "concert" its positions with Israel on plans for the reconvening of the conference. The Soviet-American communique of October 1977 was a breakage of that agreement. On different occasions President Carter or Secretary Vane have spoken of the P.L.O. as representing "a substantial part" of the Palestinians, of the need for a Palestinian homeland, of the "legitimate rights" of the Palestinians, of Sadat as "the world's foremost peacemaker" and of differences

with Israel on the interpretation of Resolution 242. If there is to be any possibility of a solution to the conflict, it is vital that the U.S. act as a mediator between the parties. It is equally important that the U.S. should not itself advocate the basis upon which negotiations should be conducted or a settlement be reached. Everyone concerned for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East must hope that the Carter Administration will be able to maintain the distinction between mediation and advocacy.