



A Journal of Politics and the Arts • February 2009 • Shvat 5769

President Obama's Middle East Advisers: An Existential Danger to Israel

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*There is always a well-known solution to every
human problem – neat, plausible and wrong.*

H.L. Menken

Abstract

The purpose of this document is to provide concise information about the perceptions of the persons, both within the Obama administration and think-tank scholars, who will use their influence to aid President Obama to formulate and implement the Middle East Policy of the United States, specifically concerning the Israel-Arab dispute. In particular, it will be shown that most of them have an erroneous grasp of the real nature of the conflict, and many of them already have a history of failure in attempting to resolve the issues. The advice that they provide to the Obama Administration should be seen in the light of these misconceptions and their history of failed efforts that were predicated upon a misreading of reality. This is not a research paper in the full meaning of the word, but rather an overview that will enable the reader to acquire a sense of the quality of the advice that is already being given to the Administration.

The period in which the United States has been pro-active in this dispute – since the early 1990s through three Administrations – has been marked by the resurrection of an almost defunct terrorist organization (PLO) and the creation of an Iranian-sponsored terrorist entity (Hamas) in the Gaza area on Israel's border. This situation, which threatens not only Israel but the entire West, is due to the fact that attempts to resolve the conflict have been hampered by misconceptions of the real nature of the problem, and considerations of domestic and

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international politics that have little to do with the actual issues. These advisers, some in the administration and many others, scholars resident in various influential think tanks, on the whole, are recommending more intensive American involvement in a controversy that has shown itself to be intractable. This is not to imply that these scholars are not pro-Israel. On the contrary, they all claim and honestly believe themselves to be acting in the best interest of the Jewish state. Their efforts, which have led to the present situation, have been aided by compliant Israeli governments which have either shared the same misconceptions or have succumbed to American pressure or both.

It is not an objective of this essay to provide solutions to the Israel-Arab dispute, but rather to provide the background to understand and evaluate the policies that are being recommended to the Obama Administration.

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1. The Advisers

The following list is not exhaustive but, according to news reports, these are the institutes and individuals that will be, and already are, rushing to provide advice to President Obama concerning the Middle East and the Arab – Israel conflict:

Institutes: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Brookings Institution, Council on Foreign Relations, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Century Foundation, Middle East Institute, Israel Policy Forum

Individuals: Richard Haass, Martin Indyk, Dennis Ross, David Makovsky, Rahm Emanuel, Aaron Miller, Samuel Berger, Daniel Kurtzer, Michael Eisenstadt, Ben Fishman, Walter Slocombe, Daniel Levy, Wendy Chamberlin, Stephen Cohen, Steven Spiegel

A review of these names gives the impression that the Obama Administration may be a Clinton Administration redux. Using any internet search machine, the policies, papers and prognoses produced by these institutes and individuals during the last several decades can be found and measured against reality. It will become obvious that they have consistently been inaccurate. Additionally, many of these individuals have been actively involved in the Arab – Israel dispute, particularly in the Palestinian – Israel negotiations. To evaluate the results of their efforts, suffice it to say that two decades ago the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was in exile in Tunisia and Hamas was almost unheard of. Today, the PLO in the form of the Palestinian Authority (PA) is a failed state and Hamas has established an Iranian supported terrorist entity in the Gaza area.

The policies promulgated today by the above institutions and individuals are briefly summarized in Paragraph 4 below.

2. The Peace Process, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas

At the present time, the resolution most consistently recommended for ending the dispute is the so-called “Two-State Solution” which is supposed to result from the “Peace Process” that

was initiated with the signing of the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn in 1993, under the benevolent eye of President Clinton. This solution envisions two states existing peacefully side by side in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. One would be a democratic Arab state (in which Jews are forbidden to live) and the other would be a bi-national democratic state called Israel. The fact that one state would not tolerate Jewish presence doesn't seem to bother the supporters of this resolution, but that is only a secondary point. As a corollary to this recommended solution, it is urged that the United States be more intensively involved in reaching this desired goal.

As a result of the Oslo Accords and the ensuing Peace Process, the Palestinian Authority (PA) comprised primarily of the PLO (which was brought back from exile in Tunisia) became an independent entity responsible, among other things, for the education of Palestinian children and for the Palestinian media. One of the meaningful gauges of the integrity of any peace process and its likelihood of success is the degree to which the parties educate toward peace. It is by this yardstick that the PA's education apparatus, formal and informal, has been a dismal failure. Instead of seizing the opportunity to educate future generations to live with Israel in peace, the PA has done everything in its power to fill young minds with hatred toward Israel and Jews. PA schoolbooks contain anti-Semitic content, delegitimize Israel's existence, and incite to hatred and violence against Jews both inside and outside of Israel. Educating against Israel's existence is further cemented through maps in the schoolbooks and in the offices of the PA in which Palestine encompasses all of Israel. Israel does not exist on any map, within any borders at all. The same holds true for the Palestinian media.

Since the establishment of Israel and especially since the Oslo Accords, generations of Arabs have been consistently brainwashed to believe the worst canards against Jews and have been indoctrinated with hate. This is not the kind of thing that can be eliminated by signatures on a piece of paper. It will take generations. Even if there were a complete turnabout today in the Arab attitude toward Israel and Jews, the Arabs will not be ready for peace with Israel in the foreseeable future.

Aside from its denial of the legitimacy of the Jewish state, the PA was essentially a thugocracy (under Yassar Arafat and now Abu Mazen) whose leaders stole millions of dollars and did nothing to provide for the Palestinian people. Millions of dollars were provided to the PA by outside donors, including the United States and the European Union among many others, but no investment of these funds was made in building the infrastructure and providing the tools for an independent state and economy. The result was an election in which the PA was ousted from power by Hamas. Hamas, although basically a terrorist organization, provided social services to the population that the PA did not, thus winning the hearts and minds of the population. Shortly after winning the election, Hamas took over all of Gaza in a bloody coup. In the words of Daniel Pipes:

The 1993 Oslo Accords began the process [to create a Palestinian state] but a toxic brew of anarchy, ideological extremism, anti-Semitism, jihadism, and warlordism led to complete Palestinian failure.

In summary, both the PA and Hamas are terrorist organizations dedicated to the destruction of the State of Israel. The difference between them is tactical. The PA has managed to convince the world that it seeks peace and wishes to establish a state while, at the same time, doing nothing to improve life for the Palestinian population nor educating towards peace. Hamas, on the other hand, makes no pretensions about its hostility to Israel and Jews, and is popular enough among the masses of Palestinians to win an election, succeed in ousting the PA, and turning the Gaza region into a terrorist base.

More basically, the primary issue that makes the Peace Process fundamentally flawed and immoral is that the two-state Solution would perhaps solve a territorial problem but the Israel-Arab conflict is not over territory. The PLO was created in 1964, three years before Israel held any of the territory that the Arabs now claim should be ceded to them to create a state. The basic problem is that the Arab world will not accept the legitimacy of a sovereign Jewish state and will do everything in its power to destroy Israel, using the PLO or Hamas to achieve this end.

3. American Perception of the Conflict

In light of the above reality, and particularly since many of the chief Middle East advisers in the Obama Administration will, apparently, be returnees from the Clinton Administration with a few from the Bush Administration, it is important to understand the American perception of the dispute as seen through their eyes. The best source for this information is a monumental, candid, and detailed 834 page book written in 2004 by Dennis Ross entitled *The Missing Peace*. Dennis Ross was the US envoy to the Middle East in the period 1988-2000 and was chief Middle East negotiator for George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. At present, this book is arguably the most authoritative source for understanding the American approach to this dispute – the approach that Ross implemented for a decade. Let's examine his attitude toward some of the issues as expressed in his book:

Jewish settlement: *...from the time I was a graduate student at UCLA I believed that Israel's policy of building settlements in the West Bank and Gaza was wrong and misguided.* (page 7)

Comment: Ross was unaware of work by Eugene Rostow (and is apparently still unaware, since Rostow does not appear in his book). Rostow was Undersecretary at the State Department (1966-1969), Dean of Yale Law School and one of the drafters of UN Resolution 242. He wrote

[Israelis] have the right to settle in the territories under international law: a legal right assured by treaty and specifically protected by Article 80 of the UN Charter, which provides that nothing in the Charter shall be construed "to alter in any manner" rights conferred by existing international instruments like the [British]Mandate...the Jewish right of settlement in the area is equivalent in every way to the right of the existing Palestinian population to live there...The West Bank is not the territory of a signatory power [of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949)]but an unallocated part of the British Mandate...Rights conferred by the Mandate can be ended only by the establishment and recognition of a new state or the incorporation of the territories into an old one...The controversy about Jewish settlements in the West Bank is not about legal rights but about the political will to override legal rights...The Jews have the same right to settle there as they have to settle in Haifa...The West Bank and Gaza are parts of the British Mandate that have not yet been allocated and are a legitimate subject for discussion.

The Arab perception of the conflict: Ross has an extensive section on the Arab and Palestinian Narrative (pages 29-44). Significant points are the following (page 42):

- **Victimization has deep roots in the Palestinian mind...**The Palestinians' sense of being victims also fostered a sense of entitlement...Responsibility was not part of the Palestinian political culture. Rather, it was the Israeli responsibility or the American responsibility or even the Arab responsibility to redress the wrongs or take steps to end the conflict.
- **Land for peace** – what UNSC resolutions 242 and 338 came to mean was simple. The Israelis should simply withdraw; there should be no need for complicated negotiations.

If Israel would withdraw, there would be no more reason for war, no more reason for conflict. Indeed, the Arab and Palestinian concept of peace was the absence of conflict; it was not acceptance, not reconciliation, not cooperation, and not warm relations. This was, of course, in keeping with the basic belief that Israel was not entitled to be there. *Arabs would acknowledge Israel's existence and end the conflict but they would minimize relations with it.*[emphasis added].

Comment: this understanding of the Arab perspective is completely at odds with what is being taught in the Arab educational systems, presented in the Arab media and preached in mosques throughout the Arab world.

- Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is the present head of the Palestinian Authority. Writing about him, Ross states (page 101): Abu Mazen, one of Arafat's earliest colleagues in Fatah, was a leading dove in the PLO arguing for coexistence with Israel and the negotiation of a peace settlement.

Comment: Abu Mazen was the main deputy of Arafat during all the years of terrorism and was responsible for raising funds for terrorist activity including the 1972 Munich Massacre of Israeli sportsmen. He is a Holocaust denier and received a PhD. from Moscow University with the thesis topic of Holocaust denial. He has, according to available records, never made a speech in Arabic indicating that he is a dove who supports recognition of Israel as the Jewish state.

Willingness to interfere with democratic processes in a sovereign country: One would assume that a nation like the United States would not overtly interfere with the political processes in a foreign country particularly a democratic one. However, this is, surprisingly and unfortunately, not the case with regard to the United States in its dealings with Israel during the Clinton Administration. Specifically, the issue is as follows:

Sometime ago, Congress passed the legislation that would enable the American Embassy in Israel to be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. (Israel is the only country where the American embassy is not located in the capital of the host nation.) The promise to move the embassy to Jerusalem is almost a standard gambit made by presidential candidates to the American Jewish community (until Obama). However, since the passage of this enabling legislation, all the sitting presidents have exercised executive privilege to prevent implementation of this legislation using the excuse that it would be against American interests in the Arab countries and would prejudice the final settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

In the 1996 Israeli election, Shimon Peres (Labor) was opposed by Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud). The Clinton Administration wanted Peres to win because they felt that Peres would be more amenable to making concessions and compromises favorable to the Palestinians. The Peres campaign (Uri Savir, the campaign's manager) turned to Clinton asking that the Americans announce that they would move the embassy to Jerusalem in order to support Peres against Netanyahu's accusation that Peres would divide Jerusalem. According to Ross (page 257):

Secretary Christopher was willing to support this if it were truly necessary for Peres to win but Sandy Berger was not willing to raise it with the President unless it would save Peres from certain defeat. [Indyk] and I could not say that. Nonetheless, I argued for it on the grounds that it would put Peres over the top, and the Palestinians would do little to oppose it. I am sure that President Clinton would have done this if we had raised it with him, but we did not.

Comment: The Americans misjudged and Peres lost the election by a small margin. However, Ross admits that the American Administration gave serious consideration to heavy-handedly interfering with an Israeli election and only refrained from doing so because the polls indicated that the candidate favored by the Americans was going to win. Interestingly, Ross and his colleagues were willing to disregard the usual caveats that moving the embassy would upset the Arabs.

- **Extortion and expediency:** The extent to which American diplomacy can cynically deal with human life and political expediency is illustrated by Ross's description of the manner in which Jonathan Pollard was dealt with at the Wye Plantation negotiations. Apparently, Netanyahu had raised the subject of Pollard's release with President Clinton in order to soften the impact in Israel of the concessions he was being pressed to make to the Palestinians. This was discussed by Ross, Indyk, and Clinton and (page 420) *The President's response was that we needed to think not in terms of what was fair but what would help us to do a deal.* Ross further records a conversation with Clinton (page 438) who asked Ross whether releasing Pollard would help Netanyahu politically in Israel. *"Yes," I replied, because he is considered a soldier for Israel and "there is an ethos in Israel that you never leave a soldier behind in the field." But if you want my advice, I continued, I would not release him now. "It would be a huge payoff for Bibi: You don't have many like this in your pocket. I would save it for permanent status. You will need it later, don't use it now."* Ross adds a footnote on the same page: *I also said I was in favor of his release, believing he had received a harsher sentence than others who had committed comparable crimes. I preferred not tying his release to any agreement, but if that is what we were going to do, then I favored it for permanent status.*

Comment: The above quotations speak for themselves. Although Ross felt that Pollard deserved to be released, he was willing to keep him imprisoned in anticipation of using him for a bigger deal. The bigger deal never came and Pollard is still rotting in a Federal penitentiary. It should be noted that Rahm Emanuel and Martin Indyk were privy to these discussions.

In Summary, I have quoted from Ross's book in some detail in order to provide insight into the mindset of those who were intimately engaged in negotiations among the Americans, Israelis, and Palestinians.

4. What the Failed Experts are Now Advising

A number of persons mentioned above in Section 2 have already rushed to publish their recommendations to the new administration. The following excerpts are a sampling of typical advice being provided by experts to the incoming administration. All are taken from documents and articles published after October 2008. I have been careful not to take these excerpts out of context that would distort their meaning.

Aaron David Miller:

Barack Obama – as every other US president before him – will protect the special relationship with Israel. But the days of America's exclusive ties to Israel may be coming to an end. Despite efforts to sound reassuring during the campaign, the new administration will have to be tough, much tougher than either Bill Clinton or George W. Bush were, if it's serious about Arab-Israeli peacemaking... But for the past 16 years, the United States has allowed that special bond to become exclusive in ways that undermine America's and Israel's national interests... The Gaza

crisis is a case in point. Israel has every reason to defend itself against Hamas. But does it make sense for America to support its policy of punishing Hamas by making life unbearable for 1.5 million Gazans by denying aid and economic development? The answer is no.

...Then there's the settlements issue. In 25 years of working on this issue for six secretaries of state, I can't recall one meeting where we had a serious discussion with an Israeli prime minister about the damage that settlement activity – including land confiscation, bypass roads and housing demolitions – does to the peacemaking process. There is a need to impose some accountability. And this can only come from the president. But Obama should make it clear that America will not lend its auspices to a peacemaking process in which the actions of either side willfully undermine the chances of an agreement America is trying to broker. No process at all would be better than a dishonest one that hurts America's credibility.

If the new president adjusts his thinking when it comes to Israel, and is prepared to be tough with the Arabs as well, the next several years could be fascinating and productive ones. I hope so, because the national interest demands it. The process of American mediation will be excruciatingly painful for Arabs, Israelis and Americans. But if done right, with toughness and fairness, it could produce the first real opportunity for a peace deal in many years.

Martin Indyk:

In the long term, this is not the moment to abandon the two-state solution. It is the time to inject the effort with greater urgency

Martin Indyk and Richard Haass:

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, there is urgent need for a diplomatic effort to achieve a two-state solution while it is still feasible. Division on both sides and the questionable ability of the Palestinian Authority to control any newly-acquired territory make a sustainable peace agreement unlikely for now. But these factors argue not for abandoning the issue but for laying the foundation for future success by improving Palestinian security forces, strengthening its economy and halting Israel settlement activity while continuing final status negotiations. The Arab states need to do more to bolster Palestinian moderates and convince Israelis that what is on offer is in fact a 23 state solution in which every Arab state will recognize Israel...What all these initiatives have in common is a renewed emphasis on diplomacy. The US can no longer achieve its objectives without the backing of regional partners as well as China, Europe and Russia.

Crouch, Meigs, and Slocombe:

...The team reached three main conclusions; (1) the peace process can only succeed once the Palestinian Authority fields security forces willing and able to fight terrorism, giving Israel confidence to draw down its own forces in the West Bank; (2) US efforts to promote peace should therefore include a substantial investment in training and equipping of such Palestinian forces; and (3) no deployment of third party troops, including NATO forces, will relieve the Palestinians from the requirement of securing their own territory.

...The essential starting point for rebuilding Israeli confidence in Palestinian initiatives to prevent terrorism is a reinvigorated effort to professionalize the Palestinian security forces by implementing a robust train-and-equip mission.

...Insofar as it is possible to provide technological solutions to some of these problems, the United States should take the lead in organizing funding for such efforts

Steven Cook and Shibley Telhami (*Addressing the Arab-Israel Conflict*, Brookings Institute):

After seven years on the backburner of American foreign policy, Arab-Israel peacemaking needs to become a priority for the new president. Recent trends in Israel and the Palestinian territories have created a situation in which the option of a two-state solution may soon no longer be possible. Failure to forge an agreement will present serious complications for other American policies in the Middle East because the Arab-Israel conflict remains central not only to Israel and its neighbors but also to the way most Arabs view the United States. Failure will inevitably pose new strategic and moral challenges for American foreign policy. The need for active and sustained American peace diplomacy is therefore urgent.

...Hold Israel to its commitment to freeze new construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and in the Jerusalem area.

...Appoint a special peace envoy to pursue actively a final-status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, while coordinating with other tracks of negotiations. A special envoy, however, cannot be a substitute for direct involvement of the president or the secretary of state, who must be engaged to sustain an effective diplomatic effort.

...Put forth American ideas on final status in the Palestinian-Israeli track at the appropriate moment. To keep the hope of a two-state solution alive, this should be done sooner rather than later.

...Develop a plan for the deployment of international forces in the West Bank and Gaza once a peace agreement is in place; these forces will be essential in the implementation phase for building a unified Palestinian police force and beginning the effective separation of Palestinians and Israelis. Their deployment must commence immediately following an agreement to help coordinate the peaceful withdrawal of Israeli forces

Summing up – With variations in nuance and emphases, the failed experts are, in general recommending – more intensive US involvement – increased pressure on the parties to reach an agreement – more turnover of land to the Palestinians in order to implement the two-state solution – placement of international military forces to ensure compliance.

These policy recommendations ignore the following facts:

- Since 1993, untold billions of dollars and international goodwill have been invested in the Palestinian Authority and no infrastructure for a functioning state has been constructed. On the contrary, Gaza has been turned into a terrorist sanctuary ruled by Hamas from which, on a daily basis, rockets are fired into Israel – since the disengagement the number of rockets fired has increased by 500%. The border between Gaza and Egypt has been used as a funnel for smuggling arms into the terrorist entity. And, after several years of such random murderous attacks against innocent civilians Israel reentered the Gaza area in a hot war against Hamas to stop the daily rocket attacks. Additionally, the educational system and media under both Hamas and the PLO have continued to promulgate the idea that the Jewish State of Israel has no legitimacy and must be destroyed. Based upon this experience, what is the basis for believing that it will be different if areas of Judea and Samaria are turned over to the Palestinian Authority?
- A two-state solution means a sovereign Palestinian state. Sovereignty means that the Palestinian state can enter into agreements and import arms from countries whose policies are inimical to its neighbors including Jordan and Israel as well as to the United States. It also means that its air space will be inviolate with all the implications for Israeli military and civilian aircraft.

In light of the above, it is no wonder that Carolyn Glick wrote (*National Review*, January 5, 2009):

The thing that concerns me is that President-elect Obama's views of Israel and the Middle East is that they are heavily influenced by his advisers, many of whom are Clinton Administration veterans. And these advisers – people like Richard Haass, Aaron Miller, Dan Kurtzer, and Martin Indyk, to name just a few – have built their careers championing the failed and dangerous peace process.

If Obama fails to recognize the folly of these advisers and replace them with men and women who use reality as their guide for policymaking, not only will he strengthen terrorist enemies of the US like Hamas and Iran, he will weaken and endanger US allies like Israel. So my advice to the incoming president would be to dump his Middle East team and replace it with advisers who have a clue. To paraphrase someone you might of heard of, I'd rather have US policy in the Middle East determined by the first 100 names in the Boston phonebook than by this team whose policies have brought about the death of thousands in their pursuit of a fantasy of peace.

5. What Realistic Experts are Saying

Considering the fact that the above experts have been consistently wrong, it is of interest to note the opinions of others who have closely studied the issues and particularly the history of the last two decades of intensive American involvement and the so-called peace process. These persons have not – as the American experts have – staked their reputations on the peace process.

- Typical comments by Israeli Middle East experts who have intensively studied the issue of a two-state solution include:
 - Dr. Mordechai Kedar of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA) notes (October 2008) that "Israel must discard all talk of further unilateral disengagements and discourage the blather about a rapid move towards Palestinian statehood. This only undercuts the Palestinian Authority Reform and building process."
 - Prof. Efraim Inbar (director of BESA) notes (October 2008) that "...there is simply no evidence that Palestinian society can be quickly transformed into a good neighbor of Israel or that a stable settlement is within reach. The damage done over the last 15 years to the collective Palestinian psyche by PA incitement and state-sponsored anti-Semitism in the educational system and media – as well as the militarization of Palestinian society – is dramatic, much time will be needed to reform a society mesmerized by use of force and whose role model has been the suicide bomber martyr...There is no choice but to stand up and say: the conventional wisdom of the past two decades is misguided. In the near term, the two-state solution is not the "best and only" hope for peace and stability in the area between the Jordan River and the sea. Israel and the West have to learn to live with and manage the Palestinian problem, as opposed to desperately trying to solve it and making the situation worse".
 - Moshe Ya'alon (General, ret.) in his new book *Derech Arucha HaKitzara (The Shorter Long Way)* (Fall 2008) fully agrees with the above statements based upon his experience since 1993 as Chief of Intelligence, then Chief of Staff of the IDF. He recommends some solutions that would require a complete long-term grass roots change in the thinking of the Palestinian society.

Finally, the thoughts of the recognized expert on Islam and the Middle East, Professor Bernard Lewis, professor emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, are of interest. His observations in an article published on January 6, 2009 at the height of the war in Gaza are pertinent to the subject of the Arab Israel conflict, and manifest insight beyond the conventional wisdom. They appeared in the Bloomberg internet website and are quoted below in full.

The current fighting in the Gaza Strip raises again, in an acute but familiar form, the agonizing question: What kind of accommodation is possible, if ever, between Israel and the Arabs?

For a long time it was generally assumed, in the region and elsewhere, that peace was impossible, and that the Arabs' struggle against Israel would continue until they achieved their aim of destroying the Jewish state. Meanwhile, Israel could survive and even serve a useful purpose as the one licensed grievance in the various Arab dictatorships, providing a relatively harmless outlet for resentment and anger that might otherwise be directed inward. In this phase, the only peace that could be expected was the peace of the grave.

The more recent history of the Middle East shows a significant change and, notably, two possible paths toward peace. One of them is limited and therefore more feasible; the other is comprehensive and therefore remote and problematic.

One approach to peace is exemplified by the policies of Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt until his assassination in 1981. He sought peace and publicly declared his willingness even to go to Jerusalem. Sadat did not take these measures because he was suddenly persuaded of the merits of Zionism. His reason was more practical and immediate -- his awareness, shared by a growing number of his compatriots, that Egypt was rapidly becoming a Soviet colony. Already the Soviet presence in Egypt was more widespread and more obtrusive than the British had been.

Sadat's Peace Initiative

Sadat realized that, on the best estimate of Israel's power and the worst estimate of its intentions, Israel was far less a danger to Egypt than the Soviet Union was. He therefore decided on his epoch-making peace initiative.

Despite many difficulties, the 1977 peace accord signed between Egypt and Israel has endured ever since -- at best cool, sometimes frosty, but preserved for the mutual advantage of both sides. It was even extended with the signing of a peace agreement between Israel and Jordan in 1994 and informal dialogue between Israel and some Arab governments.

In Iran, Sadat's murderer is venerated as a hero of Islam, and a street in Tehran is named after him.

In several Arab countries at the present time, and in wider Arab circles, there is a growing perception that once again they face a danger more deadly and menacing than Israel at its worst: the threat of militant, radical Shiite Islam, directed from Iran.

Double Threat

This is seen as a double threat. Iran, a non-Arab state with a long and ancient imperial tradition, seeks to extend its rule across the Arab lands toward the Mediterranean. And it is an attempt to arouse and empower the Shiite populations in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf and other Arabian states, long subject to Sunni domination. Iranian tentacles are spreading westward into Iraq and beyond by the northern route into Syria and Lebanon and by the southern route to the Palestine territories, notably Gaza.

This double threat, of Iranian empire and Shiite revolution, is seen by many Arabs, and more particularly by their leaders, as constituting a greater threat than Israel could ever pose -- a threat to their very societies, their very identity. And some Arab rulers are reacting the same way that Sadat did to the Soviet threat, by looking toward Israel for a possible accommodation.

During the war in Lebanon in 2006 between Israel and the Iranian-supported Shiite militia Hezbollah, the usual Arab support for the Arab side in a conflict was strikingly absent. It was clear that some Arab governments and Arab peoples were hoping for an Israeli victory, which did not materialize. Their disappointment was palpable.

Arabs and Hamas

We see similar ambiguities over the situation in Gaza.

On the one hand, pan-Arab loyalty demands support for Gaza, under whatever type of Arab rule, against the encroaching Israelis. On the other, many see the Gaza enclave-ruled by Hamas, a Sunni group but increasingly controlled by Iran – as a mortal threat to the Sunni Arab establishment all round.

In this situation, it is not impossible that some consensus will emerge, along the lines of Sadat's accommodation with Israel, for the maintenance of the status quo. Such a peace, like that between Egypt and Israel, would be at best cool, and always threatened by radical forces both inside and outside. But it would certainly be better than a state of war, and it could last a long time.

Signs of Democracy

The second hope for change would be the growth of real democracy in the Arab world. Though unlikely at the present time, there are signs that such a development is not impossible.

Some Arabs have even been willing to speak out and welcome Israel as a pioneer of democracy in the region, a model that could help them to develop their own democratic institutions. Some have drawn attention to the fact that the at times – disprivileged Arab minority in the state of Israel enjoys greater freedom of complaint and dissent than any group in any Arab country. A striking example is the current wave of protest among Israeli Arabs against the Israeli action in Gaza; open, outspoken – and unpunished. This does not go unnoticed.

The expression in Arab countries of any opinions favorable to Israel is unpopular, even dangerous, and sometimes fatal. The extent to which such opinions are held is therefore problematic, to say the least. But there are clear indications that they exist, and some have been willing to risk their lives in order to express them. If they increase and lead to acceptance and cooperation between the two sides, the Middle East might once again resume its place, which it enjoyed in both ancient and medieval times, as a major center of civilization.

Outside Powers

In the past, any assessment of the prospects for peace in the region would have assigned a major, perhaps decisive, role to outside powers. This is not true today.

The US, no longer confronting the challenge of a global rival, and amply provided with cheap oil, is unlikely to involve itself in the messy politics of the region. Russia, no longer resigned to being marginalized, has resumed some role in the Middle East. But it remains minor, and Russia is seriously impeded by its own Islamic problems at home.

In earlier times one would have assigned a major role to Europe, but at the present day what matters is not so much the European role in the Middle East as the Middle Eastern role in

Europe. A prominent Syrian intellectual recently remarked that the most important question about the future of Europe is: Will it be an Islamized Europe, or a Europeanized Islam?

The possibility remains that there will be no peace -- in which case the most likely outcome for the region as a whole is a descent into chaos and mutual destruction, perhaps by that time involving an Islamized Europe, and leaving the future of the world to be shared or contested between Asia and America.

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