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The Arab-Israeli Dispute: Current Phase

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THE ARAB-ISRAELI DISPUTE: CURRENT PHASE

THE PROBLEM

To estimate present attitudes and future trends in the Arab-Israeli problem over the next two or three years.

CONCLUSIONS

A. The Arabs and Israelis are no closer to a solution of their fundamental differences than they ever were.

B. Rivalries and disputes among the Arabs reduce their chances of doing anything significant about their quarrel with Israel; these rivalries also create some danger of precipitating crises from which large-scale Arab-Israeli hostilities could develop.

C. The Israelis seem likely to continue existing policies, including occasional retaliatory action; they would resort to force on a large scale only if they felt their security seriously endangered.

D. The Soviet leaders almost certainly view the Arab-Israeli dispute as promoting their interests. But they do not wish to see it develop into armed conflict. While continuing to supply arms to their Arab friends, they probably wish to keep the arms race from getting out of hand.

E. If and when the Arabs come to believe that the Israelis are at the point of deploying strategic missiles,¹ a phase of sharply increased Arab-Israeli tensions will probably arise. This is likely to occur within the next two to three years. In this event, the Egyptians would probably press the Soviets for help.

¹In the context of an Arab-Israeli conflict, strategic missiles would be those capable of striking the major population centers or military installations of the enemy, i.e., missiles with a range roughly between 100 and 500 miles.

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F. To such an appeal the Soviet leaders would probably feel that they had to respond in some way. They would probably pledge to help Egypt or other Arab states if attacked and would probably provide token technical aid on the Egyptian missile program. They might go so far as to provide a missile system, but we believe they would not supply nuclear warheads or assist in the development of a nuclear weapons program.

G. Although periods of increased tension in the Arab-Israeli dispute will occur from time to time, both sides appear to appreciate that large-scale military action involves considerable risk and no assurance of leading to a solution. In any event, the chances are good that the threat of great power intervention will prevent an attempt by either side to resolve the problem by military force.

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DISCUSSION

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The past six months have seen an increase in the recurrent cycle of tensions in the Palestine dispute. There have been several dozen Arab terrorist raids, a number of clashes along the Israel-Syrian border, and an Israeli retaliatory strike—on Samu—which shook the monarchy in Jordan. Yet there have been no mobilizations by Israeli or Arab armies and no ultimata of the kind which lead to major hostilities.

2. This general state of affairs exists, as it has for many years, because neither side is either willing or able to make concessions to the other on the essential elements of the problem—Arab recognition of the Israeli state, settlement of the refugee question, and establishment of boundaries. Nor does either side presently regard war as a feasible alternative. In these circumstances, relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors perforce focus on issues of a peripheral nature, whether on the day-to-day problems of cultivation in disputed border areas, frictions on the demarcation line, and the Arab boycott, or on more critical ones of Arab terrorist activities and the arms race. And over the years a *modus vivendi* has evolved which, while failing to produce a solution to any of the basic issues, has prevented a general military conflict. Recent events raise the question whether this *modus vivendi* is coming to an end.

II. ATTITUDES, POLICIES, AND POLITICS

A. Basic Arab Attitudes

3. The Arabs seem unlikely for many years to come to accept Israel as a legitimate state. They view it as a creation and outpost of the Western imperialism which should be expelled from the Arab world. Most of them appear to recognize that elimination of Israel is very far off, but this recognition does little to diminish their political and psychological hostility toward Israel. The Arab states try to maintain economic and political pressures on it, both to hamper its development and to vent their own frustration.

4. The Arabs generally resent the US relationship to Israel, but they also, especially the states bordering on it, look to the US to prevent Israeli aggression. Also the UN provides a welcome buffer against Israel, particularly for Nasser. He and other revolutionary eastern Arab leaders look to the USSR to restrain Israel, and some of them may believe that the Soviets will help them eventually to eliminate it.

5. While the Arabs are united in their enmity toward Israel, there is a wide divergence among them in displaying this enmity. Those states—the UAR and Syria—that are the active contenders for the leadership of the Arab unity

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movement take the initiative on the Israel issue as a means of promoting such claims to leadership. The Syrians for a long time have taken the lead in bellicosity; they have been involved in most of the border incidents. But as a practical matter Syria is more an irresponsible irritant than a serious military threat to Israel. Israel's real potential adversary is Nasser's Egypt.

6. Nasser, however, knows that Egypt is not now adequately prepared for military action against Israel and will not be for years to come. He realizes also that the US would oppose any aggressive acts, and he fears that the USSR would not support him. In any event, he is unwilling to risk humiliation in border clashes and is concerned lest other Arabs become involved in conflict with Israel in which he might be obliged to participate. He wants the advantages of leading the anti-Israeli cause and feels that Egypt's power entitles it to this leadership, but he fears the accompanying liabilities. Accordingly, he has tried to establish collective responsibility among the Arabs for a policy of restraint, cloaking this policy in the garb of defiance. This policy has opened him to charges of being "soft" toward Israel, but the fact that his military force is indispensable to any effective anti-Israeli action fortifies his position.

7. Jordan is the most exposed of Israel's Arab neighbors, and the Jordanian rulers have long felt that their best hope for peace and security lay in a policy of restraint and nonprovocation toward Israel. They have sought to coexist with Israel as much as politically possible, but inter-Arab feuding and Palestinian emotion have imposed severe limits on this policy. The Israeli retaliatory raid on Samu last November, with its large loss of life and property, not only strengthened opponents of the policy of restraint, but shook King Husayn's own confidence in it.

B. Role of Inter-Arab Disputes

8. The recent rise in inter-Arab feuding has had a mixed affect upon the Arab-Israeli dispute. On the one hand, it has preoccupied and divided the Arabs, thus diminishing their ability to act against Israel and reducing the Israeli problem to a corollary aspect of their main concerns. This feuding has ended for all practical purposes the Arabs' Jordan waters diversion scheme and the military significance of the United Arab Command, and it has replaced with mutual suspicion and rancor the spirit of cooperation produced by Arab summitry in 1964-1965. But the feuding has also created dangers. One is that competition among the Arabs may lead to terrorist activities and border raids and could precipitate strong Israeli retaliatory measures. Another is that, if this feuding should lead to the overthrow of King Husayn and his replacement by a radical Arab regime, the Israelis might conclude that their security was so threatened that they should occupy the west bank of the Jordan River.

9. Nasser appears clearly to understand the military and political difficulties he would face should Husayn fall. Moreover, he is now deeply involved in South Arabia and in his quarrel with Saudi King Faisal. Thus, Nasser's interest in Jordan is to cause trouble for Husayn without destroying him. The

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Syrians are less restrained and seem to think they would not be seriously endangered or politically harmed by Husayn's downfall. Husayn now seems strong enough to hold out, but the possibility of something occurring which could upset the present political balance will be a continuing one. The several Arab states will use the Israeli issue to attack each other, and their anti-Israeli actions and propaganda will carry with them the danger of precipitating a series of events leading to major military action.

C. Israeli Attitudes and Policies

10. The Israelis are aware of the advantages to them of Arab disunity and they seek to encourage it. They also realize that as the Arabs seek to outbid each other on the Palestine question, they can stir up serious trouble for Israel. In Israel there continues to be a prevailing belief that in due course the Arabs will be forced to accept the existence of the state of Israel and that they will come to treat with Israel on the more fundamental problems of their relationship as well as upon the modalities of the present state of truce. The Israelis feel confident that the US would strongly support Israel if its existence were threatened; they probably also believe that the USSR does not oppose Israeli independence, despite its arms aid to Israel's enemies. For additional assurance, Israel also has sought to exploit the interests of other powers in the area, especially France and Iran.

11. Meanwhile, the Israelis have felt that they had two major problems: the first was to impress the Arabs sufficiently with Israeli military capabilities to prevent any serious Arab military adventures, and the second was to keep a firm hand on the day-to-day relationship, so that harassment from the Arabs would be kept to a minimum. Periodic armed retaliation has been generally regarded in Israel as contributing to Israeli security on both scores.

12. The size and destructiveness of the Samu raid has raised the question whether the Israelis may have been testing reactions to a more active policy than they have pursued in the past 10 years. It could be argued, for example, that the raid was designed to create a crisis in Jordan which would then be used as an excuse for the Israelis to seize additional territory or administer a resounding defeat to Arab arms. We do not believe this to be the case. We believe that Israeli surprise over the political repercussions of the raid was genuine and that the raid in itself did not signal a more active policy.

13. This does not mean, of course, that Israel has rejected a more active policy for all time. There is dispute in Israel over policy toward the Arabs. While some Israelis believe that retaliatory raids against the Arabs do not serve Israel's interests, the large majority—particularly the military leaders—holds that force is the only thing the Arabs understand and that military retaliation is necessary to discourage Arab terrorism and border harassment. Thus we believe that the Israeli Government will continue the general policy it has followed to date. Retaliatory raids will continue to occur at carefully chosen times and places, and Israel will continue its pressure in the demilitarized zones,

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claiming sovereignty over them contrary to the armistice agreements. The Israelis are unlikely to yield on any of the basic questions, such as the refugee problem, and they will continue to keep open the option of major military action if they believe their security requires it.

III. THE ROLE OF MILITARY POWER

14. Many of the attitudes and policies described above spring from Israeli military superiority. Though the Israelis are inferior in numbers of men and equipment to the combined forces of their Arab neighbors, they are superior in training, leadership, military doctrine, and maintenance of equipment.² They could best any one of their neighbors and probably all of them collectively. Arab cooperation being what it is, Israel probably would not be obliged to take them on all at once. Both the Arabs and the Israelis know this, and this goes far to account for both Israeli toughness and Arab prudence.

15. The future relationship of Arab to Israeli military power is more important than the present one. Given their fear of each other, both Arabs and Israelis have sought to acquire not only formidable forces-in-being, but the psychological advantage of modern weapons systems. The Israelis have been concerned at the numbers and types of modern equipment provided to their potential enemies in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq by the USSR and in Jordan by the US and UK. They have in consequence sought and received considerable modern equipment from France and the US. As the Arab buildup has proceeded, the Israelis have also sought a ballistic missile system capable of striking Cairo and other nearby Arab capitals.

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17. So far, the Israeli advanced weapons program has had little discernible effect upon the Arabs. But once Israeli deployment of missiles begins, tremors of fear are bound to spread among Israel's neighbors. To minimize this Israeli psychological advantage, the Egyptians would probably claim that they had, or would soon have, a similar capability. There might be renewed interest in holding Arab summit meetings to coordinate the Arab response. While some might talk of preventive war, the Arabs probably could not cooperate long enough to get it organized. If they thought the Israelis were beginning the production of nuclear weapons, they might attempt to bomb or sabotage the Israeli nuclear installations. More likely, they would ask the US or UN to restrain the Israelis from making nuclear warheads; at the same time they would turn to the Soviets for help, both political and material.

IV. SOVIET ATTITUDE

18. The Soviet attitude in the Arab-Israeli dispute is a function of Soviet policy in the area as a whole. Broadly, that policy is to reduce and eventually to eliminate Western influence. The Soviets probably recognize that attainment of this objective involves the danger of a confrontation with the US, which they wish to avoid. They probably consider that it would be greatly to their strategic interest to exercise wide influence in the area, and they may at some future date wish some control over or access to Near Eastern oil. They no doubt look upon their objective as one which involves a long process, and in the meanwhile they almost certainly view the present disputes and political divergencies in the area as contributing to their objective.

19. Thus, we believe that the Soviets have no current interest in seeing the Arab-Israeli dispute resolved or in the emergence of a single Arab nationalist state. Arab fear of Israel provides a convenient excuse for supplying arms to the Arabs and gaining influence and position thereby. The dispute, to the degree it has intensified inter-Arab quarrels, is also convenient; it helps to identify the US not only with the Israelis, but also with the "reactionary" Arab regimes. But the Soviets do not want the outbreak of large-scale armed conflict in the area, since this would carry serious risk of a US-Soviet confrontation and thus threaten the positions which the Soviets have already won in the area.

20. We believe, therefore, that the Soviets have an interest in preventing the arms race from getting out of hand. They want to provide enough to maintain and if possible to extend their influence, but not so much as to encourage or enable their Arab friends to attack Israel. While this gives the Soviets considerable leeway in providing conventional arms, they would prefer, as a general principle, not to provide strategic missiles³ to any Arab state. Nevertheless, if the Egyptians should press the Soviets for help in order to counter Israeli acquisitions, the Soviets would probably feel that they had to respond in some way in order

³In the context of an Arab-Israeli conflict, strategic missiles would be those capable of striking major population centers or military installations of the enemy, i.e., missiles with a range roughly between 100 and 500 miles.

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to preserve their position in Egypt and in the Arab world. They would probably pledge to help Egypt or other Arab states if attacked and would probably provide token technical aid on the missile program. Even if they should decide to provide substantial assistance—such as actually supplying missiles—we believe they would not supply nuclear warheads or assist in the development of a nuclear weapons program.

21. The USSR might, in the situation projected, also put pressure both on Israel and the Arabs directly or through the UN; the Israelis, cognizant of the large Jewish population in the USSR, do in fact feel themselves under some duress not to disregard Soviet interests and pressures. Especially under the pressure of a crisis situation, the Soviets might make some move toward detente in the area, such as moderating the arms race or even making an effort to mediate some aspect of the dispute. On the whole, we think such action unlikely; the Soviets probably feel that their interests would be better served by keeping the pot simmering.

V. PROSPECTS

22. Israeli acquisition of strategic missiles will contribute to sharply increased tensions between Arabs and Israelis, though the influence of the great powers will probably prevent an outbreak of major hostilities. Other possible causes of increased tensions will persist, including the possibility that changes in Jordan could heighten Israeli uneasiness and lead to military action. Nevertheless, both sides appear to appreciate that large-scale military action involves considerable risk and no assurance of leading to a solution. The chances are good, therefore, that the *modus vivendi* which has prevailed in the Arab-Israeli dispute will continue for at least another two or three years.

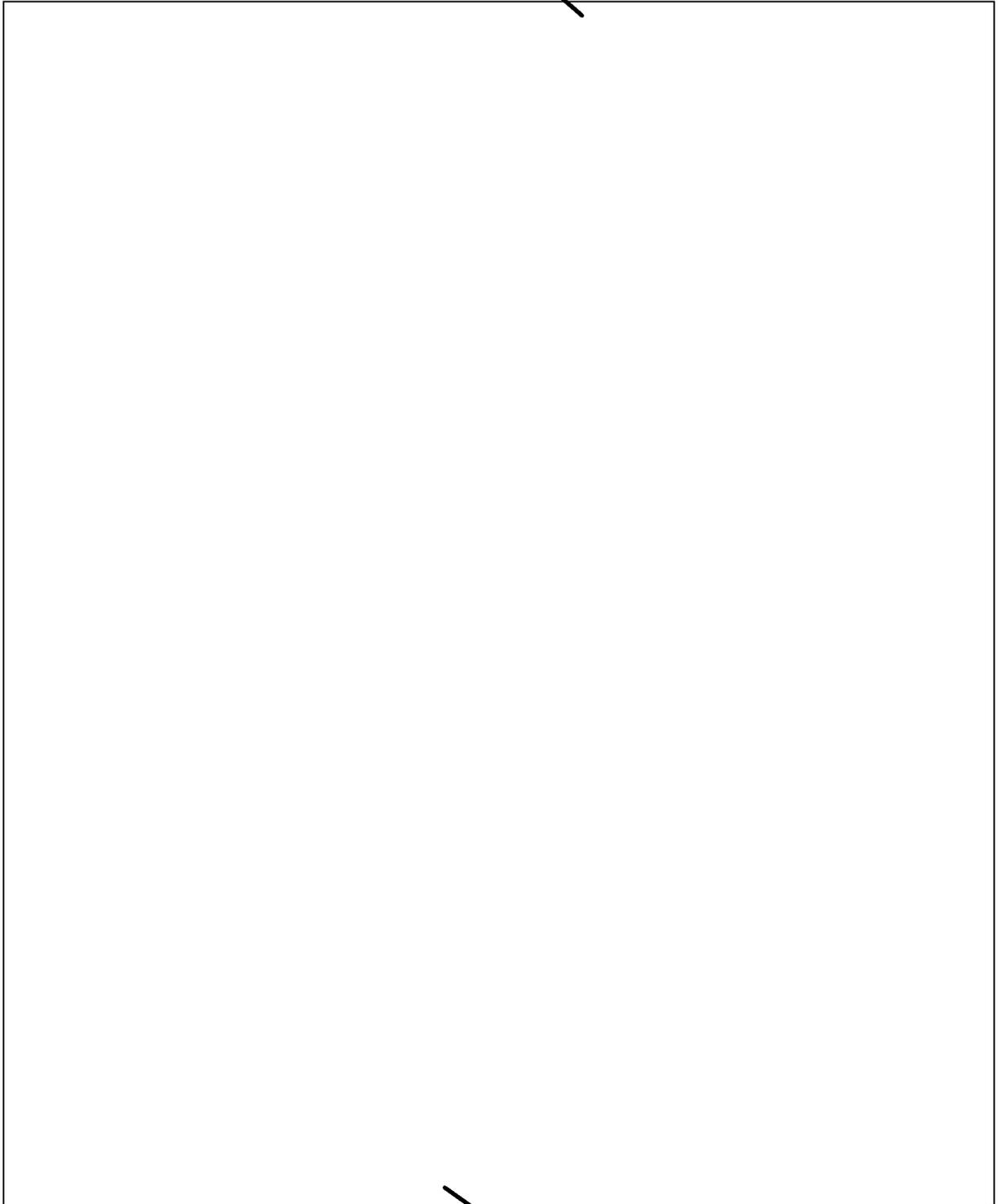
23. Continuation of this *modus vivendi* indefinitely will, of course, be a source of frustration to both parties. It is possible that at some point one side or the other might throw caution to the winds and resort to force. The Israelis, after 20 years of unsuccessfully trying to gain acceptance by their Arab neighbors, must from time to time be tempted to give the Arabs a good thrashing and hope for the best. At the same time there are Arab elements that advocate similar action against Israel. In any event, the threat of great power intervention has had a sobering effect upon proposals to resolve the problem by military force, and the chances are good that it will continue to do so.

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ANNEX

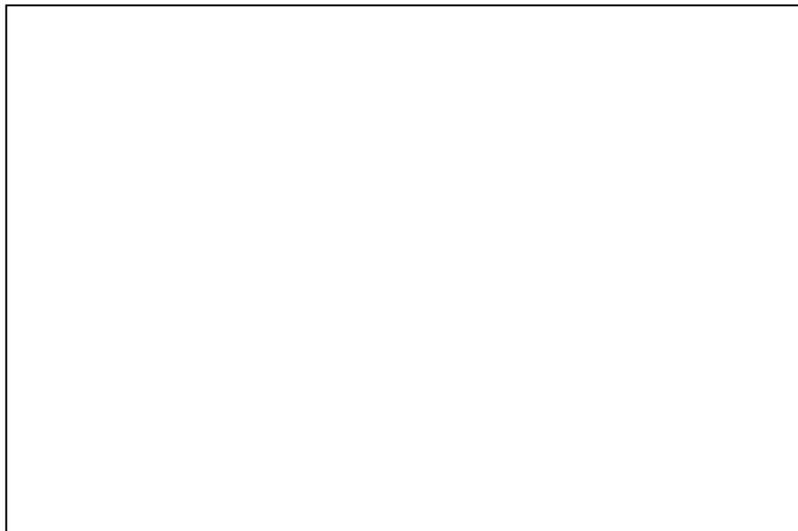
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