

# Jerusalem Letter:

# VIEWPOINTS

the Jerusalem center

JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR FEDERAL STUDIES • CENTER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES

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ISSN: 0334-4096

VP #23 29 Nisan 5742 / April 22, 1982

## THE UNITED STATES AND THE MIDDLE EAST: A GLOBAL VIEW

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It is clear to all that the Reagan Administration has undertaken a major re-assessment of American policy in the Middle East, even without declaring that to be the case. The result of the American reassessment is a pronounced shift toward the Arabs, particularly Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Egypt, as the linchpins of the American defense network. This reassessment is directly tied to the Reagan Administration's new militancy with regard to Soviet expansionism. Hence, it must be assessed in light of American needs and expectations *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union.

### Israel as a Pivot in the American Strategic Alliance

While American involvement in the Middle East dates back nearly 200 years to the wars with the Barbary Pirates, the ancestors of today's North African Arabs, it is only since World War II that the United States has begun to play a major role in Middle Eastern affairs. Today the region is of fundamental interest to the United States in two respects - with regard to its oil reserves and with regard to the American-Soviet confrontation. Both aspects have taken a more serious turn in the past decade as a result of the Arab oil embargo which, though triggered by the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, was actually in the works prior to that event, as the Arab and Islamic OPEC states discovered their power to form a cartel and enrich themselves at the expense of the oil consuming countries, and because of the increased Soviet intervention in the region.

It is important to recognize that the Middle East consists of two separate but related regions and involves two separate but related problems. The two regions are Southwestern Asia (sometimes known as Western Asia) - the territory south of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean - and Northeastern Africa from Egypt through Ethiopia and Somalia. Together they form the axis of the great Eurasian-African land mass, the crossroads of the Old World.

The two inter-related problems are the Israel-Arab conflict and Soviet penetration into the region. The United States has two basic concerns with regard to the Israel-Arab conflict: 1) the American interest in preserving access to its principal source of oil; and 2) the American commitment to Israel as one of the small band of democratic nations in the world which can be depended on to stand together against the onslaught of totalitarianism. Both problems are linked by the necessity to respond to Soviet penetration of the region.

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Subscriptions: \$25 per year

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This is not the place to describe the larger global implications of the Soviets' abandonment of the tacit agreement of more than thirty years standing not to invade countries outside of the Communist bloc with its own armies, which was one of the main pillars for maintaining the uneasy balance between the two great powers. Over the years, the United States has more or less acquiesced to internal subversion of established governments by Soviet-backed rebels and has even accepted invasion by Soviet surrogates under certain conditions. But the tacit understanding stood until the invasion of Afghanistan.

The Soviets dared to invade Afghanistan in large measure because of the Carter Administration's failure to respond to warnings delivered by its own Ambassador to the USSR, reinforced more immediately by its' demonstration of powerlessness in connection with the American hostages in Iran. The latter certainly was an encouragement to Russian adventurism. Beyond those two proximate causes, there is the Carter Administration's disastrous role in allowing American defense capabilities to decline so drastically that we have virtually eliminated our options to do anything to defend ourselves short of engaging in a total nuclear war. The implications of this for America's global posture are horrendous, to say the least.

We are all familiar with the heartland-rimland theory which views the struggle for world political dominance as focusing on control of the Eurasian land mass with its African extensions, in which a balance must be attained between the power that controls the heartland of that land mass and the power that controls its rimlands. The Soviet Union is the world's second power principally because it controls the Eurasian heartland. The free world has been able to maintain itself against the Soviet threat because it has maintained its strength in the rimlands.

The heartland itself is divided into five regions - from west to east: central Europe, eastern Europe, the Russian steppes, central Asia and Siberia. The last three are part of the Soviet Union proper. The second was conquered by the Soviets in World War II and left to them with American and western acquiescence as part of their security sphere. It remains reluctantly under Soviet control and is subject to periodic unrest, of which the current situation in Poland is more or less typical. Only the first is divided between the Soviet and Western blocs.

Surrounding that heartland are seven rimland regions. Three are in Europe. To the north is Scandinavia (including Finland), over half of which is neutralized by the Soviet Union or by its own choice despite its strong Western orientation. Western Europe, including off-shore Great Britain, is the second. It remains solidly western, if weak in its resolution to maintain a defensive capacity to counter the standing Soviet military threat. Several of the major Western European countries are further subject to the internal threat of strong local Communist parties. The third region is the Balkans, which are divided between Communist states within the Soviet orbit, Communist states outside of that orbit, one of which, Yugoslavia, is neutralist but anti-Soviet, and two non-Communist countries, Greece, which sees itself as almost beleaguered and indeed came close to being conquered by pro-Soviet Communist forces at the very beginning of the Cold War, and divided Cyprus. The recent election of a socialist government in Greece and the paralysis which engulfs little Cyprus essentially neutralize both from the American perspective.

Four of the rimland regions lie in Asia. The easternmost is East Asia and its offshore islands. It is anchored on Japan, a solid western bastion since World War II, and China which the West lost to Communism in the years immediately following the war but which, more recently, the West has been successful in weaning away from the Soviet bloc into independence. Within it are the two Koreas which at one point marked the dividing line between the Communist and non-Communist worlds, a dividing line that was held only by force of arms thirty years ago to

keep a non-Communist foothold on the eastern section of the Asian continent. In that region, Western interests are not doing badly.

To the south is Southeast Asia where, rightly or wrongly, the United States tried to prevent the advance of Communism by force of arms and was unable to do so. As a result, the core of Southeast Asia--Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia--is now under Communist rule and suffering for it. The non-Communist states on the peripheries of the Communist regional heartland are slowly building their common strength through ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) which includes the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore, three island nations off the coast of Asia; Malaysia, which is barely hanging on to the continent; and Thailand. In other words, regardless of the reason or justification, the 1970s saw the non-Communist world pushed out of most of Southeast Asia, the way the 1940s saw it pushed out of East Asia. Today, western hopes center in ASEAN, which is politically promising but militarily quite limited in resources. With regard to the rest of the region, all that one can hope for is perhaps an uneasy future restoration of Western ties with the Communist countries based on common interests as has been done in the case of China.

South Asia, the third rimland region, has been dominated by neutralist elements since its decolonization. India's neutralism, indeed, has led it to lean toward the Soviet Union in a manner not unlike the Chinese leaning towards the United States (there is reason to see the two phenomena as related). Sri Lanka is leftist but neutralist, perhaps because of its geographic position. Only Pakistan has at certain moments tied itself to the West but it has become increasingly neutralist as well, for reasons which we need not go into at this point. This is still true despite the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, while neutralist, it has managed very deliberately to stay out of Soviet clutches, something which may no longer prove as easily done if the Soviets consolidate their position in Afghanistan.

Only Southwest Asia has been anchored in a basically Western orientation since its decolonization. Iran and Turkey were actually bulwarks of the southern tier of the western defense system for many years. Most of the states of the Arabian peninsula, principally but not exclusively Saudi Arabia, because of the nature of their regimes, were necessarily anti-Communist. Lebanon and Israel were strongly committed to the west by culture and governmental system. Only Syria, Iraq, and North Yemen had turned toward the Soviet Union on a long-term basis before the Iranian revolution. Afghanistan itself had been neutral at least since the competition between the British and the Russians for influence and control over it in the 19th century and certainly since the last major British effort to conquer the country in the 1920s. Indeed, the gentlemen's agreement between Russia and the West established after World War II provided that all powers could compete for influence in Afghanistan but none would take control of it. This agreement was of course ended by the Russian invasion.

The events in Afghanistan and Iran have shifted the balance in Southwest Asia and have opened the door to further Russian penetration and the expulsion of the West as the dominant factor in the region. The dangerous implications of this for the future of the West, dependent as it is on the region's oil, do not need to be spelled out. They are enhanced by the crossroads position of Southwest Asia and the way in which Soviet penetration of that region is connected with its penetration into Northeast Africa, the other half of the Middle East. Soviet penetration into Northeast Africa, particularly the horn of Africa area, has been pronounced in recent years with great Soviet gains in Libya, Ethiopia, and Somalia (where they have later suffered reverses primarily because of the intra-regional conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia). Only the very volatile nature of the region has prevented greater Soviet consolidation of its gains.

The vital place of the Middle East in American and Western interests is such that the United States and its allies must be able to maintain their position in the region no matter what the cost. The United States must move to establish a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean. To do so is not simply a matter of stationing more naval forces there but of a proper defense build-up that will enable the United States to maintain a four-ocean fleet rather than its traditional three-ocean fleet (the Atlantic, Pacific and the Mediterranean). It requires the building up of American armed forces so that there will be units at the disposal of the government of the United States capable of responding quickly to emergencies in the area, something that is not the case now. Indeed, even if he had wanted to, President Carter could not have responded militarily to save the hostages in Iran because the United States did not -- and does not -- have the military capability to do so. Not only is this a dreadfully sad commentary on the deterioration of the American position in the world, but it was certainly an encouragement of the Iranians to act even more intransigently and to the Russians to proceed with their invasion of Afghanistan, knowing that there was no real threat of retaliation possible from the American side, short of total nuclear war, which would have been an obviously unacceptable over-response. The best the Americans could do was to boycott the Olympic Games, hardly a deterrent to Russian plans.

The present administration must develop a strategy for retaining the Eurasian rimlands within the American sphere of influence as much as possible and extending that sphere of influence where feasible. This means strengthening relations with those countries whose peoples share the same general political outlook and/or economic system as the West and to build additional ties with those countries which may not be as close to the West in character and orientation but which prefer links with us to falling within the Soviet orbit.

In other words, there is a hierarchy of relationships to be developed. Israel and Singapore must be seen as fundamental building blocks of the free world and supported accordingly, since they are indeed close in spirit and way of life to the United States. Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Egypt should be supported extensively as vital to American and Western interests but with the understanding that they have yet to demonstrate their enduring commitment to Western political institutions. Beyond that, the United States should reach out to countries like Communist China which, while far from embracing American values, do share common interests *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union.

What of the oil states? Not only are none of them really committed to the West in a fundamental way, but abroad among them, especially in Saudi Arabia, is a spirit of Arab and Islamic revival which sees Islam in conflict with Western Christendom (which is still a reality for Muslims however much it has long since ceased to exist for Christians). In that spirit, they are building themselves up for an ultimate contest with the West -- it was not for nothing that Allah gave them oil. In the interim, however, they should be encouraged to maintain their ties with the United States for geo-strategic reasons as well as to maintain access to their energy supplies. But the West should not delude itself as to the Arabs' ultimate intentions.

Fortunately, the United States does have very strongly committed friends on the Eurasian rim. Indeed, at three critical points there are countries and peoples committed to special relationships with the United States -- Great Britain at the far western edge, Israel at the southern edge, and Japan at the far eastern edge of the Eurasian land mass. All three are tried and true associates with proven commitments to the West. Britain and Japan have both proved their worth as gateways to their respective segments of Eurasia and Israel stands ready to prove its worth in that respect.

Standing as it does at the very crossroads of the Old World, closer links between Israel and the United States would serve to strengthen American capabilities and maintain a presence not only in the Middle East but in all three continents touched by Israel. In order to do this, the United States must not only reaffirm its special relationship with Israel but recognize Israel's strategic importance as comparable to that of Great Britain and Japan. In that light, the present administration should develop a policy that will put the weight of American efforts in the peace-making process on the side of the creation of a secure Israel within secure borders, recognizing that Israel's insecurity will, in the last analysis, increase America's insecurity and weaken its foothold in the region and in Eurasia as a whole. While Israel does not have the natural resources of its oil-rich neighbors, it has the fundamental stability that even Egypt cannot provide at this stage, especially in the light of the recent assassination of President Sadat.

#### What of the Israel-Arab Conflict?

Now that the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt has been signed and is being implemented, apparently very correctly by both sides, the major immediate issue is to achieve the implementation of the rest of the Camp David agreements by providing the Palestinian inhabitants of the administered territories to the west of the Jordan River with autonomy for a five-year period, preparatory to negotiating a lasting settlement for those territories and their inhabitants. The great virtue of the autonomy plan is that it enables the parties involved to take the peace process another step forward without foreclosing the options of either side with regard to a more lasting settlement. The present level of antagonism, mistrust and legitimate fears on the part of both Israel and the Palestinians makes it impossible to reach that lasting settlement at this moment. Moreover, it is equally impossible to get the various parties to agree on the shape of that lasting settlement even if it were to be implemented at some later date. What is needed, then, is a step forward that improves the situation without requiring more commitment from any party than is absolutely necessary. Autonomy offers just that opportunity and Israel's autonomy plan is a reasonable starting point for the negotiations required to bring it about.

There are four possibilities for dealing with the future of the administered territories. One possibility is for Israel to annex them straight out. While there is some extremist sentiment in Israel in favor of this course of action, even the present Israeli government has not suggested it, not only because it would meet with intense opposition on the part of the Palestinians and most of the world, but because Israelis themselves are concerned with the addition of a very large number of Arabs to the population of the Jewish state.

The second option would be for Israel to withdraw from all of the territories it occupied in the Six Day War. This is the only solution which the Arabs have put forward but it is totally unacceptable to Israel, principally for security reasons. It would restore the pre-1967 situation whereby the bulk of Israel's population would be located in a strip seven to fourteen miles wide along the Mediterranean coast and put virtually the entire population of the country within easy range of the new weaponry which has been introduced into the Middle East since the Six Day War. Terrorists, not content with that compromise, could use hand-rockets with impunity from a safe haven. Moreover, Israeli Jews are well-nigh totally united in their commitment to preserving Jerusalem as a united city under Israeli rule.

A third option would be a new partition of the administered territories, drawing the new boundaries in such a way as to restore the lands densely populated by Arabs to Arab rule in some form, while allowing Israel to retain the lightly populated areas plus those key points along the 1949 armistice lines necessary for her security.

This idea was popularized by the late Yigal Allon as the Allon Plan. While it would be an acceptable solution for many--perhaps a majority of Israelis--no Arab has yet been willing to accept it, at least publicly. Moreover, it is becoming less of an option almost daily as the many Israeli settlements in the territories become more rooted.

The fourth option is to recognize that the historic Land of Israel/Palestine reaches from the Mediterranean Sea to the eastern desert, encompassing both Israel and Jordan as provided in international law by the League of Nations in its mandate to the British after World War I. This land is occupied by two peoples, each of which has been given a state of its own -- the Jews, Israel and the Arabs, Jordan -- with disputed territory in the middle that must somehow be shared by both. The precise way in which this sharing should take place has yet to be devised. An autonomy arrangement would be a first step in that direction. Ultimately, it might lead to some kind of federal solution.

The United States, with its genius for federal solutions, a genius that is rooted in the very fabric, the very warp and woof of American life, should be in the forefront of promoting such a step and in building the conditions for federal solutions to evolve in due course. Instead, the Carter Administration adopted the second position, calling for a complete or a well-nigh complete Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines, utterly ignoring Israel's security needs, despite protestations to the contrary. It was even prepared to allow the Arabs to have two states in that little land to the Jews' one. Such a position is a betrayal of American interests, since it would weaken the security of a country whose special relationship to the United States must be similar to that of Britain and Japan. It would be an injustice to Israel and it also would betray the fundamental genius of the American people who should be committed to seeking shared rule solutions to such conflicts where appropriate.

To reiterate, no long range solution is presently in the offing. On the other hand, the implementation of an autonomy plan would be a step in the direction of the only solution that can possibly work without foreclosing the options for any solution. Autonomy is a step that would increase the power of the Arab inhabitants of the territories to govern themselves. It would be a step towards building their self-confidence without unduly jeopardizing Israel's security. Moreover, it would enable Egypt to effectively assert the correctness of its approach before the rest of the Arab world. For all these reasons, it is important to proceed with the implementation of an autonomy plan that does not foreclose options but moves things in the direction of the next round of negotiations.

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Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs President Daniel J. Elazar's most recent work on the Middle East is Judea, Samaria and Gaza: Some Views on the Present and Future, published by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.