

# SURVEY OF ARAB AFFAIRS

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*In this issue:*

**WHAT MAKES ASSAD RUN?**

**FOOD PROBLEMS IN THE ARAB WORLD**

**GHANDI AND MARTIN LUTHER KING IN THE WEST BANK?**

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## WHAT MAKES ASSAD RUN?

Itamar Rabinovich

Tension has risen recently in Israel-Syrian relations. Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad's speeches of 27 February and 8 March, in which he used strong language in discussing the conflict with Israel, were the main factor in the current increase in tension. Special attention was aroused by his pledge to liberate the Golan Heights, his veiled threat to conquer Israel proper ("We will work to place the Golan Heights at the center of Syria"), and his support of the anti-Israel activities in southern Lebanon. Assad's remarks drew official responses in Israel, and even U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger expressed concern over a deterioration to the level of a dangerous crisis. A calming message broadcast by Radio Damascus on 10 March did not achieve its goal.

This series of events raises several questions: What is the significance of Assad's recent speeches? What led him to

take this hard line publicly and at this time? What is the connection between Syria's economic hardship, which Assad also mentioned in these two speeches, and the escalation of the line against Israel?

The content and tenor of Assad's speeches immediately gave rise to the apprehension of a Syrian intention to go to war soon against Israel (direct or indirect, total or partial). They seem to reflect the political preparation of the groundwork for such a move. According to this interpretation, Assad's remarks should be regarded as a duplication of President Sadat's public statements during the period that preceded the Yom Kippur War. It is both impossible and perilous to dismiss this approach. On the one hand, Assad did not say that the sought-after strategic parity with Israel had been achieved, but he did note that Syria had made "great strides in this matter." He also repeated a well-known

motif in the "classic" Arab stand in the conflict with Israel, namely that what is involved is a lengthy historic struggle against Israel in which time is destined to work in the Arabs favor.

Assad himself is a leader who does not detail his plans before they are carried out, but rather tends to explain his policy during or after its execution. At the same time, there can be no doubt that Assad is building an impressive military machine aimed at providing Syria with the ability to defeat Israel, and that when he concludes that this ability has been achieved, he will not hesitate to use it. The main danger inherent in situations like the current one is that the potential for a Syrian-Israeli clash exists, and that sudden and unchecked increases in tension are liable to actualize it.

An analysis of the content of Assad's speeches points to a number of elements which brought about their utterance in this tone at this time:

1. A desire to exploit the internal riots against the government in Egypt in Syria's favor. Attempting to undermine the Sadat policy and the Camp David Accords has been a focal point in Syrian foreign policy since 1977. Assad himself noted Syria's achievements in this area in recent years. Recently both the failure of negotiations between Hussein and Arafat and the problems of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak provided a convenient opportunity to stress the Syrian achievement and to advance the alternative line advocated by Syria.

2. A response to steps by Israel, and especially to Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres' visit to Majdal-Shams, an Arab town on the Golan Heights. The harshest part of Assad's first speech dealt with the question of the Golan Heights. According to the text, it served as a response to Peres' visit and the clash that ensued there between supporters of Syria and Israeli security forces. Assad is particularly sensitive about the Golan Heights issue and feels that he cannot stand idly (or silently) by while some of the residents there are combating Israeli rule. It should be borne in mind that Assad was the Syrian defense minister in 1967 and that he is accused by his opponents of personal responsibility for the loss of the Golan Heights and the lack of action regarding

them. During the funeral of Zafr Al-Masri, the recently assassinated mayor of Nablus, his mourners chanted the mocking slogan, "A lion (Assad) in Lebanon, and a rabbit on the Golan Heights." Nor was this the only manifestation of criticism in the Arab world of late regarding the gap between Syrian militancy and its lack of action on the Golan Heights.

3. A desire to derive political capital from the struggle against Israel in southern Lebanon. Some of Assad's remarks were aimed at identifying Syria with the intensified struggle against Israel in southern Lebanon in recent weeks. While Syria does not act directly against Israel on the Golan Heights, it wants to benefit from the political dividends of anti-Israeli activity in southern Lebanon. Another of those remarks was intended to make clear that Syria is actually the one behind the "Hizbollah" (the fanatic Moslem fundamentalist group) and Democratic Front actions, and that it should be given its due credit in Arab public opinion.

If these were the main reasons for Assad's statements, what weight should be attributed to the economic crisis his regime is experiencing? Some of the explanations for Assad's steps indeed relate to the matter. According to these, the upscaled tension in the conflict with Israel is an effective safety valve for venting the anger and criticism that have in recent years been stored up in the Syrian public, whose standard of living has been affected by the ongoing economic crisis. The conjunction that has been created between the speeches which dealt with questions of budget and consumption and those on policy vis-a-vis Israel seem to bolster this analysis.

An undeniable fact is that the Ba'ath regime in Syria has been stuck in a protracted economic crisis since 1977, despite a temporary improvement resulting from the "second oil crisis" in 1979-1980. Moreover, a study by a senior Israeli economist (Eliahu Kanovsky, "What's Behind Syria's Current Economic Difficulties?", *Occasional Papers Series*, The Dayan Center, 1985), which was completed in 1985, indicated that the Syrian economic ills are not likely to be cured soon. Several factors have combined to form the current crisis: 1) Structural weaknesses in the Syrian economy, among them

inefficiency and corruption; 2) the shrinking of the Arab oil market, and within it Syria's direct and indirect share; 3) the halt in the flow of Iraqi oil via Syrian territory, and lately also a cutback in the Iranian aid which was supposed to offset this; 4) the defense expenditures and the reduction of the Arab aid which in previous years helped cover part of them.

Assad and his regime have been coping for about a year with public bitterness and criticism over the undercutting of personal wellbeing while members of the regime have become and are continuing to become rich by corruption. The Ba'ath party convention in January 1985 dealt with this question, and Assad himself discussed it in detail in his last two speeches.

However it is difficult to assume that this factor is sufficient to push Syria into an

adventurist policy vis-a-vis Israel. Assad's way is to decide national-security questions according to national-security considerations. The economic factor is liable to serve in this connection only as a background factor. It is creating a public mood against whose background decisions are also being made about national security. In this context, it can simultaneously play a positive and negative role. It can increase the attractiveness of a western proposal for a package deal which would mesh economic aid and talks on agreements; or it can create a negative public mood, which will help the regime arrive at radical decisions relating to an escalated line against Israel.

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## FOOD PROBLEMS IN THE ARAB WORLD

Hillel Frisch

The Arab world is facing trying times. Economically, the price of crude oil has plummeted below ten dollars a barrel; combined Arab oil revenues are likely to decrease by 70 percent compared with last year, and industry in the Arab world continues to stagnate despite massive oil-fueled investment. Politically, the Arabs feel the threat of foreign intrusion on three fronts — in Libya, by the American attacks; in the Gulf, by the worrisome escalation of the Iran-Iraq war and the obvious failure of the Iraqis to dislodge the enemy in the island of Faw; and on the Syrian front by Israel.

As if this is not enough, they are now being enjoined by Saudi Prince Talal to come to grips with another crisis — the problem of food security. Declining self-sufficiency together with rapid population growth has brought the spectre of hunger to many Arab countries. Food shortages are likely to pose a more serious threat to Arab regimes than either financial or military problems.

Prince Talal hopes that an Arab Summit will be convened quickly as a sequel to a recent Arab League meeting of foreign ministers held in Casablanca on the subject.

The two prime topics for discussion would be the ramifications of the current lag in agricultural production in the Arab world as presented in the disappointing figures published by the United Nations and the dire forecasts of insufficient food supply being broadcast by the Federation of Arab Food Industries (FAFI), based in Cairo, unless there is serious intervention on the part of Arab states.

The issue of food security is not new to the Arab world. Concern was first expressed when Arab oil producers effectively used the oil weapon to pressure the United States to convene the Geneva Conference in 1974. At the time, certain Arab leaders questioned the prudence of a policy of all out confrontation with the United States, given their increasing reliance on American food

imports, principally grains and cereals. They feared that America would reduce wheat exports to the Arab world as a counter move to the Arab world's determination to use its oil clout as an effective political weapon. The Arab oil producing states committed themselves to alter that situation through increased agricultural self-sufficiency in the Arab world.

More than a decade later, these states now realize that they have failed to attain that goal. A recent study by the FAFI shows that, in fact, they are farther away from self-sufficiency than before. Comparing two contiguous three year periods, which account for cyclical variations common in food yields, 1977-79 and 1979-82, they found that the average import bill per capita in the Arab world has more than doubled from \$53 in 1976 to \$115 in 1982, reflecting a 60 percent growth in real terms.

The steady decline of self-sufficiency in food production may explain the rise in imports. For example, during this time the percentage of home-grown cereals for total consumption decreased from 57 to 51 percent. Wheat self-sufficiency declined from 38 to 36 percent and the production of poultry meat and eggs, the principle sources of protein, declined from 71 to 60 percent. These two food categories were intended to replace the more costly and wasteful reliance on red meat. Meanwhile, the percentage of locally bred red meat for total consumption declined from 71 to 64 percent.

Even worse is that experts estimate that the degree of self-sufficiency will only decrease in the next fifteen years. The reason is clear; food production can not meet the increasing demands of one of the fastest growing populations in the world. According to the FAFI report, by the year 2000, home grown cereals will only account for 43.1 percent of total consumption compared to 51 percent at present, and home grown eggs 51.8 percent compared to the present 60 percent. Poultry and wheat will retain their present shares of total consumption.

But self-sufficiency in itself is hardly what led Prince Talal to urge the Arab states in such critical times to discuss the agricultural problems of the Arab world. Food demands clearly place a strain on many Arab regimes, especially those closely linked with Saudi Arabia and its future. Still fresh in the minds of many Arab statesmen are the December 1977 food riots in Egypt, which broke out when the Sadat government tried to decrease wheat subsidies. Egypt, a country which fifty years ago exported grain and cereals, has now become a major food importer whose bill amounted to 80 percent of its total export revenue in 1982. Egypt's food imports almost equalled the total domestic food output. According to the projections of the FAFI study, the situation is likely to continue deteriorating. The differential growth in domestic demand for wheat production is over double the average of the Arab world as a whole.

Moreover, these projections were made before the latest droughts that have plagued West Africa and the southern Sahara states. Observers fear that drought will spread further north to the areas feeding into the Nile, upon which both Sudanese and Egyptian agriculture depend. The lack of water is related to the omnipresent desertification of Arab lands. The dangers are especially great in the Arab world because two-thirds of Arab land is arid or semi-arid.

These projections were also made before oil prices dropped from \$26 to \$10 a barrel. There is certainly a connection between oil and agriculture, which will no doubt surface in the proposed conference. It is clear that any proposed solutions cannot depend on massive aid from the oil producing states. As it is, aid for industrial and agricultural investment in Arab countries provided by these states has been declining since 1981. After all, these states have their own import bills to meet.

*Hillel Frisch is co-author with Shmuel Sandler of Israel, the Palestinians and the West Bank (Lexington Books).*

## GHANDI AND MARTIN LUTHER KING IN THE WEST BANK?

Danny Rubinstein

It is worth taking notice of a tiny and little-known Arab organization preaching non-violent protest, based in East Jerusalem, near the American Colony Hotel. The Arab Organization for Non-Violence was established about two years ago by psychologist Mubarak Aoud, who has since been trying to promote it without great success.

Aoud comes from a Christian refugee family and was brought up in Christian educational institutions in East Jerusalem. Later he studied in the U.S. where he was influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and by the struggle tactics of Martin Luther King. Together with a handful of friends, he is trying to implement these methods in the West Bank. They distributed a pamphlet in several places in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, for example, that called on Arab residents to choose one day, week or month on which to completely boycott the State of Israel. On that day they should refrain from buying Israeli products, from eating food produced in Israel, from wearing clothes made in Israel, from going to work in Israel or from visiting Israeli territory. "Feel free at least for one day," the pamphlet said. Security authorities confiscated the pamphlets, and an Israeli security man contacted Aoud, but no further measures were taken.

When Martin Luther King's birthday was marked in Israel by a ceremony, in which Foreign Minister Shamir participated, naming a street after the American human rights fighter, the Arab Organization for Non-Violence issued a communique which said: "The life, struggle and methods of Martin Luther King are an example for us (the Palestinians) of how to fight the injustice and the wrongdoing we experience on a daily basis, and we hope that the waving of King's banner will not lead to our being arrested by the Israelis. . . ."

Aoud's Organization for Non-Violence reflects a growing realization that has been spreading through the Palestinian population (mainly in the territories) in recent years. People in Nablus, Hebron and Gaza well understand that today and in the foreseeable future there is

absolutely no chance for an Arab military option which would strike at Israel and free them from the burden of the occupation. Around the same time that Aoud set up his organization, a meeting took place at Birzeit University between academics from the territories and Israeli Arab academics in which the Israelis shared details about their lengthy experience and their struggles. In effect, they came to a similar conclusion. Many in the territories are saying, for all intents and purposes, that wars, terrorism and violence have not brought us national liberation; let us seek other ways.

The most conspicuous expression of this approach is to be found in an article published by Dr. Seri Nusseibeh in the East Jerusalem weekly, *Al Mawqef*. Nusseibeh's article reiterated remarks he made on Israel TV: "If I have to choose between limited autonomy and annexation to Israel, I prefer annexation, with all the obligations and privileges it entails. As a citizen of the state, I will be able to fight for my standing and my rights."

Similar thoughts are being voiced more frequently among groups of the Arab intelligentsia in the West Bank and Gaza. If one begins with the assumption that it is all but impossible to set the clock back and that de facto annexation is a *fait accompli*, then the Arabs of the territories must look for other ways to pursue their struggle for civil rights such as by means of passive resistance and non-violence.

How will Israel react to such a development? Already today, for example, 120,000 East Jerusalem Arabs could, if they wished, exercise their right to vote in municipal elections. If they voted en bloc, they could decide who the next mayor of Jerusalem would be. This is just one example. Today, nearly 40 percent of the population of Eretz Israel West of the Jordan are Arabs. Any attempt on their part to obtain or realize existing rights would dramatize the real price Israel must pay for its control of the West Bank.

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## ANALYSES OF THE ELECTIONS AT FOUR PALESTINIAN UNIVERSITIES

In the previous *Survey of Arab Affairs*, Data Base presented the detailed results of the recent student elections at the four Palestinian Universities in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. While student elections are not a major event in most of the free world, they are the only free elections that occur in the Palestinian community in the territories. They reflect the sentiments of the next generation of leadership and serve as a gauge for fluctuations in political support. Student wings of Palestinian organizations inside and outside the territories compete for control over the powerful student councils. The election results are headline news in both the local and foreign Palestinian press. In this issue, the election results of the four largest and most important universities are analyzed. Included are the Islamic University in Gaza (4,400 students), Al-Najah University in Nablus (3,300 students), Hebron University (2,400 students), and Birzeit University near Ramallah (2,300 students).

According to the East Jerusalem Communist weekly *Al-Talia*, the elections were a case of the cup being half empty or half full depending on one's point of view. The Communists stressed the emptiness of the PLO-Fatah-affiliated Shabiba victories in Al-Najah, Birzeit and Hebron Universities, while Fatah supporters were elated with the string of Shabiba victories.

The fact remains, however, that the Shabiba student movement has emerged as the dominant party in Palestinian politics in the territories. It enjoys a strong plurality but no majority and is able to enter into coalition with at least one other faction to achieve it.

A unique aspect of this year's election campaign was that coalition-building was left for after the elections. Last year, the Shabiba, less sure of themselves, wooed the Democratic Front away from the traditional leftist coalition of Communists and Popular Front supporters to win the Birzeit elections. Both sides were ridiculed for forming an alliance that ran contrary to their platforms. The Fatah-backed Shabiba supported, though grudgingly, Arafat's reconciliation with King Hussein. The Al-Whada group, towing the Democratic Front line, was adamantly opposed to the agreement. Yet the Shabiba wanted to maintain control of the Birzeit student council, and Al-Wahda wanted to maintain its mid-center

position in the Palestinian political spectrum.

This year the Shabiba ran for election alone. It was a bold move on two accounts. 1985 was the year of the February 11th agreement in which Arafat seriously compromised the PLO's resolve in establishing the independent political Palestinian state. It was also another year of continued cleavage in the nationalist camp, so deep in fact that only one alliance was achieved - between the supporters of George Habash of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Communists. Traditionally, the Islamic Bloc reaps benefits from internal faction fighting; however, this was not the case.

In Hebron and Al-Najah Universities, the Shabiba faction came in on top. The results were especially gratifying in Hebron University where the Shabiba won over half the vote, thereby removing the fundamentalists from the student council by a significant margin. The fear was dispelled that Hebron University, which began as an Islamic legal college, would follow in the footsteps of Gaza University and become a bastion of fundamentalism.

Nevertheless, the fundamentalists remain a powerful force, as the recent elections in two junior colleges in Ramallah and Kalandia indicate. In this case, the Shabiba decided to form a nationalist coalition against the Islamic Bloc, but in both elections, the fundamentalists garnered one-third of the vote.

The political differences between West Bank Christians and Muslims were additional elements influencing Birzeit University elections. At Hebron and Al-Najah Universities, nearly all the student body is Muslim and on the whole less affluent than the student body at Birzeit. In Hebron and Al-Najah, the leftists won 6.4 percent of the vote and 13.1 percent respectively. At Birzeit, where Christians compose nearly 30 percent of the student body, the Al-Itihad w'al Taqadum, the leftist coalition, won 34.7 percent of the vote. Fortunately for the Shabiba in both cases, the Christians are a declining minority in the West Bank. Gaza has little political clout as a region, and this leaves the Muslims of the West Bank as the main contender against the nationalist camp. In the universities and colleges, at least, they are voting for the PLO-Fatah mainstream.

-H. F.