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THE SUPERPOWERS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

One of the most significant international developments since the end of World War II has been the independence and nationalism of states traditionally dominated or colonized by Western or European powers. These new states, particularly in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, have formed a third force to be reckoned with in the structuring of global, regional and bi-lateral policy and planning. Though individual unto themselves they are often joined together in common effort to avoid their perceived threats of economic or political "recolinization" by a major power. It is the study of the relationship between the "Great Powers" (read: the United States and the Soviet Union) and these third-world nations in the Middle East that serves as the topic of both *The U.S.S.R. and the Middle East,* edited by Michael Confino and Shimon Shamir and *The Middle East: Quest for an American Policy,* edited by Willard Beling. Though the former is comprised of contributions by many specialists—some American but most Israeli—the latter is almost exclusively a compilation of American work. As a result one gets the views of Americans about American policy and Israelis and Americans about Soviet policy. Nevertheless, both books deal with the essential issue: the role of superpowers in the Middle East.

The formulation of foreign policy for a great power is in many ways more complex today than it ever was before. During the nineteenth century, the international system, particularly in Europe, was precisely that, a system. With the United States still in its infancy and largely concerned with internal conflict and development the focus of international politics was Western Europe. An alleged "balance-of-power" was struck between the major European powers by which each recognized the others' legitimate right to exist. Each therefore continued this relationship at the behest of the others and saw their own self-interest in the continuation of the system.

This era of power balance politics ended with World War I. By 1920 the Turkish Empire—already a weak and ignoble proposition thirty-five years earlier—was dismembered, its territories parcelled out among the major allied powers. Nation-States in Eastern Europe that were not to be found on the map ten years earlier were carved out of the defeated Austro-Hungar-

ian Empire and the monarchy in Germany was replaced by a weak and cumbersome republic. Finally, the Romanovs were chased from the royal house of Russia and replaced by a new governmental form known as Soviet Communism.

The state of transition following World War I had its impact upon colonial territories as well. Egypt, Iraq and Syria, for example, were both granted at least nominal independence in the twenties although their political and economic dependence upon Britain and France continued. Other colonies were mandated to the Allied Powers under the new provisions of the League of Nations. Exploitation of these territories was now to turn to benevolent tutelage and preparation for independence. The result, however, was often patronage and further exploitation.

The inter-war transition was predictable only in its instability. The new East European nations had been carved out of territories upon which there were many conflicting claims and on which resided populations with long histories of hatred and animosity. They were easy prey for neo-autocrats and fascists. This trend was reinforced by the threat of international communism at the door of these tradition-minded, independent villagers and peasants. Royalism and rabid national culture were all the more attractive because of it.

The conclusion of WWII, in many senses, returned the world to a system of international balance. Although the United States held a preponderance of power, the immediate post-war period saw the creation of "People's Republics" throughout Eastern Europe and the serious threat of Communist take-over in Greece and Turkey. It was clear that despite the wartime alliance the United States and the Soviet Union would soon be international adversaries. The Soviet explosion of its first nuclear device, soon after the war, underlined this fact.

The world was thus thrust into what seemed to be a repeat of the earlier European system of balance. Two superpowers predominated the global scene with subsidiary powers variously united under the Warsaw and Nato Pacts. While both sides rhetorically espoused either international domination or liberation and protection from such domination each recognized that the nuclear capability of the other meant that serious confrontation must be avoided. Each had a stake in the status quo and it could realistically be said that the "balance of power" had been replaced by a "balance of terror."[1]

No matter what the motivation, it appeared that the balance had been restored. This was implicit in the official policies of the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The latter developed a "two-camp" theory which recognized the political confrontation of the superpowers and the constraints placed upon all political actors as a result. The theory took its essential form in the writings of A. A. Zhdanov who proclaimed the existence of these "camps" in his speech at the organizing conference of the Cominform in September of 1947.[2]

Similarly, the United States de-

vised an intricate theory designed to respond to Soviet successes in Eastern Europe. It was titled the theory of "containment" and its chief architects were George F. Kennan and George Marshall.[3] It was Marshall's program operating alongside the Truman Doctrine—aimed chiefly at Greece and Turkey originally and Western Europe afterward—that was the major structure of this era of American policy.

Yet despite the many superficial similarities of the post-WWII period with the international system of the 19th Century, at least one important difference was evident, one which is dealt with extensively in both the Shamir-Confino and Beling volumes. The dissolution of European domination in "under-developed" areas and the rabid, radical nationalism that replaced it resulted in national forms that would simply not abide neat categorization or systemic typology. Native leaders were influenced by factors which forced them to interpret national self-interest in manners foreign to European statesmen.

It is in this area that the Confino-Shamir volume, published under the auspices of such a "third-world" nation, far surpasses the Beling work on American policy, in quality. Several of the important influences upon leaders of the "third-world" are dealt with and deserve treatment here. One primary influence is the desire to modernize. It should be realized that nations—either colonized outright, administered under a mandate or trusteeship, or dominated eco-politically by a major European or American

power—maintain a strong love-hate relationship with that power. They are awed by the technological ability and industrial might of their patrons. This awe may translate itself into respectful imitation and deference.

It is just as likely, however, that this awe and respect may be more than tempered with a deep resentment and jealousy. The feelings of helplessness in the face of economic exploitation—whether from a foreign power or native oligarchs acting in its favor—are not soon forgotten. Nor are the deep feelings of demoralization in the face of the weakness of traditional culture and belief to stem the tide of Western incursion. The confrontation of the systems of belief themselves create yet further conflicts and strains which will be analyzed shortly.

These pressures make it imperative for the leadership of a newly independent state to modernize as quickly as possible. Such modernization can have subtle rewards beyond the more obvious increase in the gross national product or the development of heavy industry. It can indicate that technology is not the monopoly of the American or European. Rather it lies within the potential of all peoples and can be accommodated to their own social systems as well. Although the technological development may be nothing more than a crude copy it can serve to vindicate the traditional faith and prove that ancient structures and lines of authority are still valid and viable.

In order to accomplish this great development—one which took Eu-

ro-American culture centuries—in a matter of years, native leaders employed almost any means. Usually these included national mobilization, radical economic planning centralized control of politics and the media and terror. Indeed many such methods are still in use in the U.S.S.R. It is not so long ago that peasants were being violently collectivized and those who disagreed within the government were "purged." Indeed the Soviet Union and Mainland China—two powers who appear to have accomplished this type of modernization within the short spans of fifty and twenty years respectively—are often used as models for third-world development.

This obsession with modernization is closely related to a second major influence upon the direction of third-world states: anti-colonialism. The resentment/respect for former patrons, which in its positive manifestations leads to technological development, also has a negative side. This negative aspect is reflected in a rabid anti-colonialism which will spark a sharp emotional reaction to:

    a) the former colonial power;
    b) those that were colonial powers elsewhere:
    c) those that were allied with colonial powers:
    d) anything that smacks of colonialism.

Such a policy motivation has several international implications. In the first instance it often means that "third-world" nations will be pre-disposed against the West. This is because no matter how benign, colonial powers were (the most obvious examples of Western colonial

powers include England, France, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, and the Netherlands) their colonial policy was usually less than benign. Although its colonial experience was brief and limited, the United States suffers in this regard by association. In addition, the economic exploitation of "under-developed" nations by American industries also buys little in the way of good-will.

It is precisely this emotional reaction to colonialism and neo-colonialism that serves as common ground for otherwise disparate, third-world nations. There are few cultural or social similarities between Egypt and India. Yet they both underwent a British colonial experience and can agree on their mutual disdain for the patronage of Western powers.

In addition, reaction to colonialism has a second notable consequence. It often results in an overblown sense of self-importance. In their zeal to exhibit equality with the "established" powers and their aforementioned zest for modernization at any cost, these new states insist upon parity with the superpowers in terms of sovereignty, decision-making and integrity.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the United Nations. Here underdeveloped nations of questionable legitimacy stand equal with the superpowers and undertake to "outvote" them on major issues of international policy. Editorially it may be added that this delusion on the part of the third-world—born as many are from inherent weakness and insecurity—is no serious crime. It is its institutionalization on the part of the General As-

sembly that flies in the face of external reality.

Several other features of third-world politics and its relationship to the U.S. and the Soviet Union are outlined in these two volumes and are deserving of mention here. One cannot discuss Middle Eastern politics, for example, without mentioning the influence, both positive and negative, of Islam. To even the most superficial of views, it is evident that the relations between such states as Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Lebanon are not the usual between independent, sovereign nations. In many ways their independence from each other as well as their territorial boundaries are more a reflection of their colonial experiences than their own choice. It is clear that they each belong to a larger cultural entity.

This entity has been popularly termed "the Arab nation" and a large portion of its culture has been traditionally structured by Islam. The authority patterns, the relationship between ruler and ruled and the patterns of belief are largely bounded by the teachings of the prophet. No Arab leader can ignore this reality and only the foolhardy can attempt anti-clericalism and expect to gain large-scale support.

Despite the unity of purpose that such homogenous cultural and social forces sought to bring, Islam has been a divisive force as well. As Lenczowski points out in his contribution to the Beling text[4] Arab unity is a myth which runs counter to overlapping concerns with both traditional brotherhood and revolutionary ideology. Islam

has often held its believers back and prevented them from pursuing modern attitudes and practices. However, it should be noted that not all Arabs are Muslims. Indeed some of the most creative modern Arabic writings have been penned by Lebanese and Syrian Christians of the Maronite and Malchite denomination. Some have argued that not unlike Jews in Christian society the creativity and innovative ability of Christian Arabs is a function of their inability to to fit neatly into traditional Muslim society and their freedom from the intellectual encumbrances that such society implies.[5]

Conversely, not all Muslims, even in the Middle East, are Arabic. Turks, for example, are non-Arabic Muslims and are occasionally equated with the erstwhile colonialists as a result of the Ottoman experience. Similarly, Persians are not included within the Arab nation, especially since they practice "Shi'ite" Islam which differs perceptively—and often violently—with the dominant Sunni Islam practiced by most Arabs.

Often these differences are difficult for Western observers to perceive. As a result of the Anglo-American cultural influence upon Western politics and diplomacy, it has become commonplace to assume that the international political arena is a secular or, at least, pluralist one. To judge policy alternatives in terms of anything but pragmatism is unacceptable, indeed outside the field of perception. The result is often insensitivity to many of the issues presently under discussion.

157

One cannot hope to understand the intricacies of Middle Eastern affairs without placing within the context of the dominant religious cultures. In addition, one must be prepared to account for the transitional nature of the social environment and the subtle, often pedantic differences between the practices, rituals and ethno-religious traditions of the several communities. Further, this statement applies both to Israel as well as the Arab world. Within this context the similarities between the two are overwhelming and it may be said that the American Jewish community as well as the dominant European community in Israel often indicate similar insensitivities.

These subtle elements have often been reflected in the relations between member states of the Arab nation. In the name of radical, modern pan-Arabism, for example, Egypt under Nasser and Syria under the Ba-ath Party undertook major social reforms, centralized and radical economic programs and an attempt to undercut the power of the clerical sector. In the name of tradition, culture and pan-Islam, on the other hand, Saudi Arabia undertook major programs to withstand such radical change. The clash of these opposing cultural forces contributed to a proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in Southern Yemen for the better part of a decade. Similar ethno-cultural conflicts have erupted in Jordan between native Beduins and the 850,000 Palestinians who have resided there since 1948. The inability of the superpowers to take advantage of these conflicts and

cultural strains is outlined by implication in Binder's contribution to the Confino-Shamir volume.[6]

By and large these are variables that have not been seriously understood in the relationship between the superpowers and their client states in the Middle East. Obviously this brief survey is by no means intended to be either exclusive or conclusive. Other issues also exist and influence the policy position of these nations. The fact that oil-rich nations in the Middle East tend to be conservative while oil-poor nations are most susceptible to radical appeals is another issue which begs exploration. The role of the guerilla within this context has also been neglected. Unfortunately, both volumes under discussion say little about either issue.

One might only conclude that short of accounting for the differences in the policy-making environments big-power influence in the Middle East can only be a sometime thing. It is precisely that point that runs throughout the Confino-Shamir book. The Soviets have seen that quite clearly in their expulsion from Egypt in 1971. The events since then have indicated that it made no impression upon them, however. Similarly, the U.S. is experimenting with the shifting sands of Arab good will and may learn a similar lesson. The policy-making environment and the variables which influence it do not lend themselves to firm international commitment in the Middle East.

Despite the many parallel insights contained in both these books there are also significant differences. They both attempt to encom-

pass several viewpoints as any good collection of essays should. Yet the two volumes seem occasionally to be operating on different planes. Beling interprets the concept of varying viewpoints differently from Confino and Shamir and employs a variety of methodological models including statistical techniques and highly sophisticated conceptual devices. The best examples of these are the Roger Harrel essay which utilizes statistical correlations to determine the level, magnitude and interaction between nations in the Middle East and the Charles Wagner essay which uses content analysis to study American newspaper coverage of Middle Eastern events.[7]

While this conceptual diversity lends a richness to the Beling volume, it often limits its usefulness for non-academic readers. More crucially, however, the work fails to include substantive differences of opinion but remains largely within the realm of "moderate, literate, academia." Perhaps the sole exception to this estimation is John Orr's study of the novel area of the role of the Christian clergy in American policy and opinion formation.[8]

As might be expected, the Confino-Shamir work, written largely by Israelis and produced in Israel, focuses on many more internal and regional issues than does its companion work. Rather than dealing with the Soviet role alone it includes essays studying the impact of native Communist movements—outlawed in almost all Arab states—in Egypt, the Sudan, Iraq, Syria and Jordan. Unfortunately no parallel study of the role of native Is-

raeli Communism is included.[9]

In addition, there is an attempt to cover several ideological bases as in the opposing views of Richard Pipes and Alexander Dallin regarding the influences upon Soviet foreign policy.[10] In contrast to the Beling volume, however, there is little here to capture the wealth of methodological approaches open to the analysts of international politics. Each essay is a replica of the others in this regard. Essentially the analysis is historical though the scope varies from global, to regional to national.

Conceptually, it may be stated that the diversity of the Beling work is vertical, i.e., similar bounds but different methodological levels. The Confino-Shamir volume, on the other hand, is horizontally diverse, i.e., similar methodological levels but broader substantive bounds. It is well, therefore, to read these two books together so that the richness each offers may offset the other's limitations and the two complement each other.

Both books are worth reading, for they offer, when read together, a rich diversity of opinions, approaches and methods to the study of the Middle East. The major drawback upon reading both, however, is that one is led to disturbing conclusions. Perhaps the best a superpower can do in the region is to leave it alone. This may allow it to defuse, allow tensions to de-escalate and problems to be solved within their own context. The likelihood of that happening is very slight.

NOTES

1. The term belongs to Winston Churchill. See J. Stoessinger, *The Might of Nations* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 162 and pp. 174-179. See also the report of Churchill's speech in *The New York Times* 3/2/55.

2. See M. Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1967), p. 114.

3. Generally, the intellectual origins of containment are credited to Kennan's article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" in *Foreign Affairs* (July, 1947).

4. G. Lenczowski, "The Arab Cold War" in *The Middle East: Quest for an American Policy* edited by Willard Beling, (Albany: State U. of New York, 1973), pp. 55-72.

5. See, for example, A. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (London: Oxford, 1970). Also, M. Khadduri, *Political Trends in the Arab World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970).

6. L. Binder, "Transformation in the Middle Eastern Subordinate System" in *The U.S.S.R. and the Middle East* edited by M. Confino and S. Shamir, (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1973), pp. 251-273.

7. R. Harrell, "Conditions of Conflict between Nations: An Overview of Middle Eastern and North African Nations" and C. Wagner, "Elite American Newspaper Opinion and the Middle East: Commitment vs. Isolation" both in Beling (ed.) *op. cit.,* pp. 126-145, 306-334.

8. J. Orr, "Theological Perspectives on the Arab-Israeli Conflict" in Beling (ed.) *op. cit.,* pp. 335-347.

9. See for example my "Notes on the Political Thought of Dr. Moshe Sneh" *Middle East Journal* (Summer, 1973), pp. 342-352. Also my "Dialectic Zionism" *Judaism* (Summer, 1973), pp. 334-341.

10. R. Pipes, "Some Operational Principles of Soviet Foreign Policy" and Alexander Dallin, "Domestic Factors Influencing Soviet Foreign Policy" in Confino and Shamir (eds.) *op. cit.,* pp. 5-31 and pp. 32-58.

160