

THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS: WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

By LOUIS HARAP

TO ASSIGN responsibility for the current precarious situation in the Middle East is an exercise so complex that it is better, perhaps, to give up the search altogether and concentrate on solutions. Yet the fullest possible scrutiny of the sources of the crisis is not irrelevant. On the contrary, the more we know of these origins, the more adequately shall we be equipped to reach solutions.

The relations of the Jews and Arabs in the past decades can be known only if studied in their connections with the interests of the succession of great powers which struggled for domination of the Mediterranean area for the past century. Before and during World War I, the contending powers were Turkey and Germany versus Britain and France; between the two world wars Britain held a dominating position virtually unchallenged; and after World War II, Britain and the U.S. vied with the Soviet Union. In each case the contending powers carried out their rivalries by maneuvering the relations of Jews and Arabs into antagonism. Instead of promoting friendly relations between the Arabs and the immigrating Jews for the benefit of both peoples, the imperialist powers incited them to antagonism as a means of assuring dominance.

For its part, the Soviet Union had an elementary motive of defense of its

southern border to acquire influence in the Middle East. The entire history of Soviet participation in the area can be understood only within this perspective, though in recent years its policies have been extremely one-sided. Between the October Revolution and World War II, the Soviet Union was too busy establishing itself to take any measure to protect her southern borders in the contest of British imperialist domination of the Middle East. But when both Arab and Jewish nationalisms made the British hold on the area untenable after the war, the Soviet Union exerted its full prestige and strength through the UN to expel Britain from the area. The unfolding of Soviet policy in the Middle East is traced and analyzed informatively in Aharon Cohen's important book, *Israel and the Arab World*.*

By the time the Palestine problem came before the UN, the Soviet Union

*Funk & Wagnalls, N. Y., 1970, 576 pages, indexed, \$15. This long, detailed and deeply interesting book, replete with documentation, is invaluable for those who would understand Arab-Jewish relations over the last century. Aharon Cohen is a socialist-Zionist who has from the beginning had the unshakable conviction that Arab-Jewish conciliation is the only way out of the impasse. He is able to confront the shortcomings of Jewish leadership in Palestine and Israel without losing perspective on the problems of both peoples.

had several reasons for viewing the Jews favorably. In the 1940's, many Jews realized that their interests had become antagonistic to the British Mandatory power, while the Arab leadership was reactionary and pro-Nazi; the British White Paper of 1939 drastically restricted legal immigration to Palestine, when hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution were hampered in their effort to reach Palestine, and the Soviet Union was at this time sensitive to the Jewish predicament; the Jews of Palestine, like those all over the world, had maintained a strong anti-Nazi position during the war; and no doubt the Soviet Union was glad to cooperate in the shrinking of British imperialism which an independent Palestine would signify.

The tenacious and, indeed, decisive Soviet support for establishment of two autonomous states in Palestine, one Jewish and one Arab, is not sufficiently remembered. It is useful to recall not only Soviet UN Delegate Andrei Gromyko's words on May 14, 1947 [full text in our May, 1967 issue] but also those on Nov. 26, 1947, a few days before the historic UN resolution was passed. His remarks have relevance even today.

"A study of the Palestine problem," he said, ". . . has indicated that the Jews and the Arabs in Palestine do not want to and are unable to live under one rule. The logical conclusion of this is that if the two peoples residing in Palestine—each with deep historic roots in the country—cannot live together within the same framework, the only thing left to do is to set up, instead of one state, two states—an Arab and a Jewish one. . . . The partition proposal is not aimed against the Arabs. The decision is not meant to cause injustice to either of the two

principal peoples of Palestine. . . . Representatives of the Arab states represent the partition of Palestine as an historical injustice. But this point of view cannot be justified, if only for the reason that *the Jewish people has been connected with Palestine for a lengthy historical period. . . .* It is not superfluous to recall again that *the Jews suffered more than any other people from the effects of war waged by Hitlerite Germany.* You also know very well that in Western Europe there was not a single country able adequately to protect the interests of the Jewish people in the face of the lawlessness and tyranny of Hitler's men." (Italics added.)

What is even less easily recalled is that the UN decision quickly came under attack by the U. S. between its adoption Nov. 29, 1947, and May 14, 1948, projected date of implementation. In tandem with Britain, the U. S. delegation at the UN worked mightily for a revision of that decision so as to bring Palestine under a UN trusteeship. On the ground in Palestine, the exiting British were deliberately sabotaging the transition from the Mandate to independence, and were inciting Arab violence against the Jews. Throughout this period, however, the Soviet Union stood steadfastly with the UN decision. The matter was resolved by the Jews of Palestine by their declaration of independence on May 14, 1948, while the UN was still debating the trusteeship proposal. And when the British-supplied Arab armies attacked Israel, and the U. S. embargoed arms shipments to the area (the Arabs were amply supplied by Britain), essential arms were air-lifted to Israel from Czechoslovakia.

How then, can we explain why, 20 years later, the Soviet role was reversed: why it gave uncritical support

to the Arabs, and sustained a one-sided attitude and marked antagonism toward Israel?

This reversal was not arbitrary. What had intervened was the Cold War. The Middle East was involved in it up to the hilt, willy-nilly, by the strenuous efforts of the U. S. and Britain, after NATO was formed in 1949, to secure the southern flank in their anti-Soviet strategy, by military pacts in the Middle East—but without conspicuous success. For in the meantime, also, the Arab leadership was steadily changing in the direction of more national, independent and anti-imperialist policies. While Israel, after a two and a half year period of “non-identification” with East or West until Nov., 1951, increasingly identified itself with the Western bloc, Soviet interest tended toward support of the developing anti-imperialist policies of the Arab nations.

The history of these changes in the Arab states and in Israel is set down in their complications in *The Second Arab Awakening*, by Jon Kimche,* British Jewish journalist of Middle Eastern affairs for several decades. The left in Israel opposed the growing alignment, under Ben-Gurion's leadership, with the West in the Cold War, but the pro-Western position prevailed, aided by the anti-Jewish attacks signaled by the Slansky trial and the Doctors' Plot. This pro-Western orientation culminated in Israel's Sinai attack in 1956, in collusion with a decadent imperialist policy of France and Britain. Ben-Gurion even went so far

* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, N. Y., 1970, 288 pages, \$6.95. Kimche compresses within brief compass the complex history of Arab nationalist movements from World War I to the present, and how they affected the formation of the state and nation of Israel. Kimche believes that the focus of power has shifted in the Middle East from Britain to Egypt.

as to try to wheedle West Germany into sponsoring Israel's entry into NATO through his false notions of Israel's security. It was for such reasons that the Soviet Union reversed its earlier support for Israel, and, beginning with 1955, proceeded to arm the Middle Eastern Arab states heavily.

In response to NATO, and especially U.S., attempts to embrace the Middle East in their world strategy, the Soviet Union played the game of big power politics in the interest primarily of securing her own southern flank. When one adds to this, Israel's alignment with the West, and the Arab bloc's neutralist policies, the shift in Soviet policy becomes quite understandable. But the new policy was pursued so ruthlessly as to ride roughshod over Israel's rights.

While legitimately attempting to protect the physical security of her southern flank, the Soviet Union assumed a totally uncritical attitude toward the Arab states. Israel could do no right, the Arabs could do no wrong. In both official and unofficial writings, Israel policy was characterized in the most simplistic terms; Arab provocations were ignored, simply dropped out of consideration.

Although the Soviet Union continued to affirm Israel's right to existence as a principle, and at times exerted a moderating influence on headlong Arab tendencies toward belligerence against Israel, uncritical support of the Arab States in the UN and in all diplomatic dealings played its part in creating the uncontrollable situation that resulted in the June, 1967 war.

A typical example is the UN deliberations in the last days of May, 1967, when the UN might have prevented the crisis from getting out of control. Arthur Lall, formerly Indian delegate to the UN, wrote in *The UN and the*

Middle East Crisis, 1967,* that, "as late as the evening of May 29 [Soviet] Ambassador Federenko still seemed doubtful that the [Security] Council need address itself to the situation in the Middle East." The Soviet Union "condemned Israel for its warlike preparations, particularly against Syria," but had no word of criticism for the *prior* Arab mobilization at Israel's borders. The onus for the explosive situation was placed entirely on Israel.

Given the legitimacy of the Soviet Union's self-defensive interest in the Middle East, the connection between arms supply and influence is nevertheless very close, and in this respect the situation is very complicated. Small countries are not armed by great powers—even socialist powers—for altruistic reasons. The Soviet's motives are primarily those of strategic defense, and in pursuance of this she expects advantages, such as alignment in foreign policy and/or economic gains, from the recipient. Yet, the "relationships between arms supplies and Cold War strategies in the Middle East is intricate and often oversimplified," writes Geoffrey Kemp in his essay in *Soviet-American Rivalry in the Middle East*.** Following World War II, the countries of the Third World threw off their colonialist masters, but they were weak and underdeveloped. The

great powers—at first mainly Britain and the United States—rushed in to supply these countries with arms in the effort to hold them within their imperialist orbit. The arms were mostly needed to pursue local wars left as a legacy from imperialism—India with Pakistan, inter-Arab conflicts in Yemen and the Sudan, as well as Israel-Arab wars.

When imperialist influence in the Middle East weakened, the Soviet Union succeeded in 1955 in displacing the West as arms supplier—and exporter of influence—in a great part of the Arab Middle East. But while influence does not always go along with arms supply, withdrawal of arms supply almost always means also loss of influence. Thus, scrutiny of the arms suppliers of the Arab states directly involved in the confrontation with Israel—Egypt, Syria and Jordan—shows that these countries do not form a monolithic ideological front, as often assumed in oversimplified versions of the crisis. While Syria and Egypt are wholly armed by the Soviet Union, Jordan is sustained by the U. S. and Britain. When one goes on to the less immediately involved Arab states—Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Al-

** Praeger, N. Y., 1969, edited by J. C. Hurewitz, 250 pages, \$7. This book is a collection of papers by experts on U. S.-Soviet rivalries in the Middle East with respect to arms supply and the military, economic and cultural influences. Each writer surveys the recent past and then ventures a projection of what would happen to U. S. and Soviet influence in the sphere of his concern in the immediate future under conditions of tension, of limited detente and of full relaxation of tensions. Most of the papers look forward to "stability" in the Middle East as the desired condition, by which they mean maintenance of the status quo. United States prospects are often treated with candor in this largely technological survey of problems. The Editor himself reflects State Department views.

* Columbia University Press, N. Y., 1970, rev. ed., 370 pages, paperback, \$2.95. Lall records in great detail the procedures and expressed positions in the UN handling of the crisis between May and Nov., 1967. He criticizes the UN for its less than vigorous confrontation of the crisis in its earliest phases, but concludes that the Security Council Resolution of Nov. 22, 1967 was "the most successful United Nations effort to negotiate the basis for a settlement of the Middle East situation." Lall sees hope for breaking out of great power impasses in the UN in more active and aggressive leadership by the smaller nations.

geria, Morocco—the picture becomes even more complicated, with British and French, as well as U.S., armaments.

Despite the complexity, however, it is true that on many issues the Arab states as a whole, like the Soviet Union, are an anti-imperialist force in the world arena. Does this necessarily mean, as some assume, that their position vis-a-vis Israel is anti-imperialist? If one considers that the basic issue is whether or not Israel shall continue to exist as a state, the Arab position is at best so ambiguous as to appear to Israelis, not without cause, as a threat to their existence. Anti-imperialists in any real sense do not threaten to deprive a people of their statehood, and to the extent that the Arab states do so jeopardize Israel's statehood, they are not acting in an anti-imperialist manner. By the same token, *uncritical* Soviet support of the Arab position is not anti-imperialist, since it increases the threat to Israel's existence. In 1967, such support did not prevent the situation from going out of control, and continuing Soviet diplomatic and military support of Syria and Iraq, even though these states stubbornly refuse to acknowledge Israel's right to exist and refuse to negotiate for peace, increases the danger of a war that the Soviet Union clearly does not want.

The heart of the problem, however, remains in the direct relations between Jews and Arabs. Outside powers such as Britain, the U.S. and the Soviet Union affect the situation through their influence on the policies and actions of one side or another. This fact does not absolve the two peoples of responsibility for the consequences of their attitudes and acts toward one another. In this respect, the Jews share responsibility for the

present impasse between the two peoples. Aharon Cohen's *Israel and the Arab World* presents a comprehensive, detailed, documented survey of attempts over almost a century past, from the time when the Jews began their movement into Palestine.

Cohen has special competence in this area, since he has devoted much of his personal energies from the time he came to Palestine in 1929 to the work of Jewish-Arab conciliation. He is a socialist-Zionist, a member of Hashomer Hatzair and Mapam, and was at the center of many efforts to reach a *modus vivendi* for Jewish-Arab co-existence, especially as secretary from 1941 to 1948 of the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement and Cooperation. Cohen traces the history of such efforts with a steady eye and does not hesitate to assign failure to the Jewish side when it clearly belongs there.

Cohen's book shows that a Jewish-Arab impasse was not inevitable. From the very beginning of the modern *Aliyah* (immigration) in the 1880's the urgency of the need for a stable understanding was perceived by some Zionist leaders. Ahad Haam was sensitive to the problem from the start. In an essay in 1891, he warned the Jewish settlers that they must deal with their Arab neighbors "with love and respect and . . . with justice and respect for the law." But, he added, the Jews in Palestine were doing "the exact opposite," and he warned prophetically that the Arabs "will cherish animosity and harbor vengeance." There were those in the early days of the Zionist movement who tried, without success, to urge upon Herzl the need to take the problem of relations with the Arabs seriously. And no wonder they failed, for had not Herzl conceived the Zionist movement as that

of "a people without a land returning to a land without a people"?

But there were a number of Zionist leaders who understood the necessity for an agreed-upon basis for co-existence with the Arabs. Arthur Ruppin, director of Jewish settlement in the early 1900's, saw this problem as so urgent that he even "advised against insisting on the 'Jewish Labor' slogan" because, by depriving some Arabs of work, it would create Jewish-Arab tension. (The "Jewish Labor" slogan was intended both to encourage vocational Jewish redistribution of labor, especially in agriculture, and to provide work for immigrants.)

An unsuccessful effort was made before World War I to found an Arabic paper for communicating with the Arab people. A number of times extended negotiations between Zionist and Arab leaders were held to arrive at some understanding on disputed matters between the peoples, such as guidelines for Jewish immigration and land purchases. But the Zionist Executive in each case somehow let the matter lapse at a crucial stage in the negotiations. On one such occasion in 1914, Haim M. Kalvarisky, a leader of the conciliation movement between the two world wars, charged in a book published in 1939 that "the Jews did not realize how important it was and took a frivolous view of the Arab national movement, and even denied its existence."

Following the Balfour Declaration

in 1917, Chaim Weizmann sought to assure the Arabs that the Jews wished to live in peace and harmony with their Arab neighbors. Then occurred one of the most important, though unsuccessful, efforts at conciliation. Weizmann and the Hashemite Emir Faisal reached an agreement on Jan. 3, 1919, that the two peoples cooperate

in the development of Palestine, which would be part of Syria, to be ruled over by Faisal. But the Palestinian Arab nationalists who opposed both Faisal and the Zionists intensified their opposition to both the Jews and the British. Nevertheless, instead of consolidating the accord with Faisal, the Zionist leadership let the negotiations lapse. Another great opportunity was lost, because most of the Zionist leadership, Kalvarisky wrote, had "contempt for the Arab national movement and the Arab people, which were dismissed as unimportant, and [had] an exaggerated appraisal of our own strength and the help of Europe and America."

After World War I, when Britain and France had divided the former Ottoman empire between them, they lost all interest in promoting Arab-Jewish harmony. On the contrary, the British deliberately set out in classical imperialist fashion to "divide and rule." During the Mandatory period the Zionists continued to underestimate and even ignore the needs and aspirations of the Arabs on the assumption, which proved so illusory, that their future lay with the British rather than with a unified program with the Arabs. Cohen brings to bear much concrete evidence that, once the Mandate went into effect in 1922, important British figures in Palestine actively instigated Arab hostility against the Jews and actively worked against a harmonious relationship of the two peoples.

Time and again, Cohen shows, Arab-Jewish negotiations were carried to an advanced stage, and then halted on the advice of the British. Dr. Weizmann, who genuinely wanted to establish friendly relations with the Arabs and favored a successful outcome of such negotiations, finally broke them off on advice from the British, because his

final loyalty was to the British, in whom he believed the Jewish hopes for a homeland rested. Others like Martin Buber and Chaim Arlosoroff were leaders in such negotiations during the Mandate. But the fact is that most Zionist leaders were simply misleaders on this crucial issue. Cohen says flatly, "An analysis of the speeches and writings of most Zionist and Jewish leaders—including Labor Zionist leaders—reveals an astonishing misunderstanding of the Arab world, of Palestine Arabs in particular, and of the context in which national movements develop."

At the Biltmore conference in 1942, which projected the post-war policies of Zionism and at which Ben-Gurion's views prevailed, the Arabs were considered the main enemy, and dependence was placed on Britain and the U. S. to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. How mistaken this conception was, was demonstrated by the realities of 1945 to 1948. But Cohen emphasizes that the "socialists" among the opponents of the Biltmore Program regarded imperialism as the main enemy (and how right events showed them to be!), and demanded unity with the Arabs in overcoming imperialism. They proposed a binational state in Palestine. But the Biltmore Program had the effect of reinforcing the position of those Arab nationalists who were implacable enemies of the Jews. Backed by the British, these Arab elements created a situation which by 1948 made binationalism no longer feasible.

What emerges from Cohen's book is that responsibility for the poisoned and explosive atmosphere in the Middle East is shared by elements from all parties concerned. British colonial policy bears perhaps the basic responsibility, as it played upon both Jewish and Arab national feelings over the

decades to promote deadly friction between the two. But neither the Arabs nor the Jews are free from responsibility. The wisest elements in both groups realized that their best interests lay in unity against the imperialist powers. Their efforts were frustrated, Cohen shows, both by British interference and by the short-sighted outlook of the respective leaderships, and, since 1948, by missed opportunities for peaceful settlement on both sides.

Finally, what light do the books by Kimche and Cohen shed on the origins of the refugee problem? Kimche asserts that the basic explanation was the example set by the Palestinian Arab leadership, who fled after the UN decision. Leaderless in Palestine, the Arab masses simply followed their leaders into exile. When, writes Kimche, "the men who had dominated Palestinian politics for two decades" fled, "the mass exodus followed." To Kimche the disputed question of whether or not the Arab leaders ordered their followers out of the country is not the most important. Basic is the fact that "the bewildered Palestinians merely followed the example of their leaders."

For his part, Cohen suggests that "horror-propaganda of the Arab Higher Committee," promising a blood-bath when the Arabs met the Jews in battle, frightened the Arabs away. No Arab leaders remained behind to reassure the masses. When Jewish victories in battle accumulated, the leaderless Arabs fled in panic. The Deir Yassin massacre of 1948, although it undoubtedly helped frighten the Arabs even more, only accelerated a movement that was already under way. By the time of Deir Yassin in April, 1948, a third of the Arabs who became refugees had already fled the country. As May 14, 1948 approached,

SHUKHAIRY'S MEMOIRS (From New Middle East, London, July)

I HAVE been reading Ahmed Shukairy's memoirs, which have now been published in Beirut by Dar al-Awdah. He calls his book *Dialogues and Secrets with Kings* and, as was to be expected, it has a frankness which is not designed to spare the feelings of Arab rulers who fell foul of Shukairy or brought about his downfall after the 1967 war. Although he sets out to enlighten the Arab reader as to the causes of the defeat, the primary purpose of the book is clearly the self-defence of Ahmed Shukairy. It is a formidable defence and written with a remarkable degree of honest self-criticism tinged with a desire to embarrass those who went along with him and then disowned him. Shukairy assures the reader that he made no move and no statement of importance without first consulting Nasser. Then comes this evidently intended mischief-making paragraph: "Admittedly, I frequently called on the Arabs to liquidate the State of Israel and to throw the Jews into the sea. I said this because I was—and still am—convinced that there is no solution other than the elimination of the State of Israel and the expulsion of all Palestine Jews from Palestine."

Shukairy acknowledges that these statements may have damaged the Arab cause but he defends his use of them by saying that they reflected the general view held by Arab Heads of State, politicians and newspapers. It was the accepted view that the non-Palestinian Jews "should be driven into the sea." . . .

Cohen reports, some Arab commanders in Jerusalem even ordered a stop to flight from the area. Further, Cohen reports the view of a Haifa Arab leader, Elias Kussa, that places the blame for the flight upon the British for deliberately creating a chaotic situation from Nov., 1947 to May, 1948, and for encouraging flight of Arab officers, and even in some cases compelling them to flee to Transjordan. And Cohen states that "another factor," even if it was "not decisive," was "the policy adopted in certain places by the Jewish armed forces."

In any case, responsibility for the refugee problem, both for its inception and exacerbation over two decades, is shared. As in many other aspects of the crisis, the problem is not now to allocate blame but to seek a viable solution.

In any case, all this is history. The urgent question now is not who is responsible for what but how can a stable peace be achieved. The months of stop-and-go negotiations through UN mediator Gunnar Jarring and U.S. State Secretary William Rogers have developed nothing to change the prospect that peace is possible only on the basis of the UN Security Council Resolution of Nov. 22, 1967. But if the resolution is to be implemented in a peace agreement, each side will have to give something. Israel will have to reduce her demands for territorial adjustment to the minimum necessary for security. And Egypt and other Arab states must be prepared to allow adjustments, instead of demanding return of "every inch" of Arab territory. Unfreezing the Suez Canal would be a welcome beginning.