ANALYSIS OF THE INHERENT TENSIONS OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

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"The challenges facing American strategist in the Middle East and N. Africa are immense. This is because here in this region and sub-region confrontation is often protracted and lasting. It is not so much of armies as it is of very different sets of values and emotions; reason and irrationality; faith and fear; survival and hegemony; and justice and perceived oppression and domination. It is not as much a clash between cultures, civilizations or religions, as much as it is between civilization and anarchy – between civilization and lawlessness, and between the rule of law and no law."[1]

The above quote is accurate in terms of the multitude and variety of tensions that plaque the Middle East and North Africa, however the tensions described are neither intractable nor insurmountable. In relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the tensions are magnified, oftimes distorted, and frequently used to generate conflict between the many states, their respective polities, and the plethora of domestic, regional, and international interest groups that have a stake in the outcome. The quote is also accurate in terms of the challenges that face American strategists, the nation that serves as the primary mediator and interlocutor in an effort to establish a just and lasting peace in the region. This paper will argue that the challenges described can be overcome with an *informed* understanding of the competing historical contexts by which the parties view the conflict, the internal social and political dynamics and structures of Middle Eastern states, and the impact of the military and economic balance of power. It will conclude that the Israel-Palestine conflict can be resolved by acknowledging and respecting the conflict's dynamics through the prisms by which the different parties view it; acknowledging that no solution will right all past wrongs; and mitigating the tensions through a multi-lateral approach that includes other regional actors.

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[1] Assignment Quotation

The historical prism is the first of the three prisms that require understanding and analysis. This history and prism drive the political dynamics of the Middle East - impacting the political economies, minority politics, the tensions between modernity and traditionalism, and the socio-religious political structures. While American strategists tend to view most conflicts through a Morgenthau type of realism, this is but one equation by which the parties in the Middle East perceive it.

First and foremost, the perspective of the Arab world informs us of the regional dynamics and the intertwined religious and governmental structures that shape their perception of the Arab-Israeli conflict. One of four cultural groups in the Middle East, the Arab world has been predominately Islamic since God spoke to Mohammed in 610 A.D. and the subsequent Islamization of the region following the early Arab conquests.   The nature of Islam as passed through the Koran and Haddith is one of a beautiful and just vision for the Umma, and like many religions it is one based on rules. This deontological structure leaves very little room for secularism as it does not separate politics from faith - therefore it must be recognized that from an Islamic perspective the question of Israel and Palestine is not only a matter of land or ethnicity, but also one of religion. This is critical factor, in part because the question of Israel-Palestine is a question of tolerance. Lending hope to the peaceful coexistence of peoples in Palestine, Mohammad Boujnourdi stated, "Tolerance according to Islam does not mean that we believe that all religions are the same. It does not mean that we do not believe in the superiority of Islam over other faiths and ideologies. But is it not true

that Islam grants Jews and Christians living within Muslim-ruled nations a special status as dhimmis?...This agreement has served as a model for Muslims ever since (628 AD)".[2]

The second cultural group whose historical perspective should be understood is that of the Jews, and by extension the perspective of Israel writ large (this paper will not address the Turkish and Persians, the other two cultural groups). The Jewish religion predates that of Islam, and began in Palestine. Following the flight of the Jews from Palestine after Jacob took the land from the Canaanites, the Jews believe that Israel is not only their historic homeland, but has indeed been promised to them by God. Indeed, remnants of the second Jewish Temple – the holiest of Jewish religious sites – sits in Jerusalem. It is the Jewish belief that God will appear on Earth upon the rebuilding of the temple (the site is also the location of the Dome of the Rock where Mohammed is believed to have ascended into heaven and is as important to the Muslim faith as the Wailing Wall is to the Jewish faith).

The true significance of the Arab-Israeli conflict, however, must be couched not only in terms of theological beliefs, but also in terms of the rise of nationalism in the Middle East. While taking differing paths, both Arab nationalism and Jewish nationalism are historic developments that shape the current conflict.

For the Arabs, it is a question of nationalism versus imperialism following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the subsequent carving up of the peoples and land following World War I, the British Mandate, and the rise of Western modernity. Balancing traditional religious society with the rise of the nation-state, initial efforts to overcome previous Western

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[2] "Islam and Tolerance", Mohammad Boujnourdi in "Voices Within Islam; Four Perspectives on Tolerance and Diversity, Current History 104, no. 678 (January 2005)

imperialism saw the rise of Pan-Arabism and the relative cohesion of Islamic based nation

states in the region. Although most were authoritarian in nature, lacked pluralism, and were

unequal in terms of economic weight, they were all Islamic nations. This structural

development enabled Pan-Arabism to play a role due to the commonality of religion and

cultural groups emphasizing the Umma as both the Islamic community, and later as the larger

Arab community. While the Pan-Arabic movement failed and was superseded by

nationalism (Wasaninay) following the defeat of Arab nations to Israel in both the 1967 and

1973 wars, this did not obviate the sense of identity inherent in the overarching Ummas of

both the Arab and Islamic community. This nationalism, along with other factors, increased

the tensions with Israel.

The creation of Israel might be viewed as the penultimate event of Western

Imperialism in the Middle East. While Arabs lived, farmed, and maintained communities in

Palestine for centuries, the early 20th century Alya's during the pograms against the Jews in

Eastern Europe served as a rallying cry for the return of Jews to Israel – their promised land.

The Western nations that determined the borders of new nation-states following World War I

(significantly not Arab nations) over time supported the return. Following the Peel

Commission Report, the Balfour Declaration, and especially the Holocaust, the United

Nations granted Israel land under UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 366. The call

for a "people for a land, in a land without a people" was not an accurate depiction of the

conditions under which Israel was created, for the land did have a people - in fact 1.1 million

Arabs resided there in 1941. While Israel is a politically secular state, in must be viewed as a

Jewish state. Similarly, while not all Arab states are "Islamic Republics", they must be

viewed as Islamic states. This does not mean, however that confluences of interest are non-existent, particularly in terms of the national interests of the regional players.

The military balance of power, indeed the *imbalance* of military power in Israel's favor that evidenced itself and continues following the humiliating Israeli defeat of Arab nations in 1967 and again in 1973 shapes both the strategic and domestic environments of Middle Eastern Nations.   The Arab nations know that they cannot defeat Israel using military might, and this serves a blocking effect against a repeat of the '67 or '73 wars. On the other hand, the economic might of the Gulf States blocks Israel, and the United States as the key international player from taking too heavy a hand, and by proxy somewhat moderates Israel's behavior. Both of these factors are competing leverage points for Israel with its military superiority, and the Gulf States with their economic superiority. This asymmetry, while minimizing the chances of war due to Israel's superior military might, also prevents a forced unjust solution due to the tremendous influence regional Arab states play.

The regional dynamics are significant also in that the Israel-Palestine conflict is seen in its larger context of Jewish and Arab. The Arab states are players in both the conflict and any solution, and use the Arab Palestinians as a rallying cry for justice within their own nations. The nature of the political structures in most Arab states is one of authoritarian governments, an unequal distribution of wealth and power with small elements controlling the majority of resources. As these states struggle for modernity, they do so in an undemocratic and frequently heavy handed manner in terms of internal security. Additionally, large elements of the populations are unemployed, and many others poorly educated. The internal development sectors such as health care, education, and skill

development do not possess the breadth or depth necessary to reach much of the population. Coupled with burgeoning youth and internal migration to urban centers, these factors leave large elements of society disenfranchised and dissatisfied.

These are significant factors with regard to the domestic politics, and their manifestation on regional security and politics. The factors described above create conditions that facilitate the rise and expression of dissatisfaction with the modern governments, provide a ready pool of poorly educated and unemployed young men to take up a "cause" in a legitimate effort for political voice and power. These are the conditions that gave rise to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Al Q'aeda elements in Saudi Arabia, and others. The minority politics often play themselves out in violence and militancy and a call for traditional Islamic political systems, rather than through civil society and in internal reform based upon the governments fulfilling their responsibilities to their larger populations. The disproportionally large internal security apparatus'' seen in many Arab states underscores the concern – even the fear – that the governments have of losing their grip on power (e.g. Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia).

One manner by which a government can counter internal problems is by looking outward, and directing negative attention away from their own weakened structures. The state of the Palestinians is just such an issue that can serve to divert popular attention away from internal discord, and serve as but one tool by which to maintain internal power. If not redressed, the consequence is a people – Palestinians – who will continue to be pawns on the larger chessboard of regional politics and culture.

These factors require a complete and nuanced understanding as the United States attempts to moderate a long-term and just peace. As strategists, we must view the conflict's dynamics through the prisms of differing histories, the social and political structures of Middle Eastern states, and the asymmetrical military and economic balances of power. Our approach should include assisting Arab states improve their governance, rule of law, and economic institutions in order redress the legitimate concerns of their populations. This approach will mitigate radical calls for informal reform, thereby allowing those states the maneuver room necessary to play a more constructive role in solving the conflict. The history of the Jews must be recognized as legitimate by regional players, however the conditions require stable governments that can confidently acknowledge the right of Israel to exist without further destabilizing their governments.

Likewise, the Israeli's need to understand and accept the Arab view. The U.S. should leverage its relationship with Israel (and tremendous amount of aid we provide them), in order to reduce settlements and in time completely turn over the occupied territories to the Palestinian Authority, and provide Arabs and Muslims with all the rights of citizenship. There will be no winner, yet there ought not to be any one loser. The prisms and actions described above – if used by all parties involved - will advance a just and lasting peace, provide voice to internal polities, stabilize domestic political structures through increased participation and improved distribution of wealth, and resultant greater regional stability.