

Breaking All the Rules: American Debate over the Middle East

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Breaking All the Rules | Daniel Pipes

American Debate over the Middle East

The usual debate did not take place during the year and a half that the United States Marines were stationed in Lebanon. American conservatives said almost nothing about their standard concerns: they did not stand by the government of Amin Gemayel as a democratic ally or emphasize the riches Lebanon gained through its laissez-faire economy, nor did they blame Lebanon's problems on Soviet mischief. As for liberals, they did not blame Lebanon's problems on unequal distribution of wealth, call for land reform, sympathize with the rebel forces, contest the validity of parliamentary elections, hold the authorities responsible for human rights outrages, or—despite its control over less than one percent of the country's territory—contest the legitimacy of the central government. In short, neither side put forth its predictable ideological arguments.

Rather, conservatives and liberals debated among themselves about practical matters. Some Republicans hesitated to support a military undertaking in a complex situation where the U.S. had no clear vital interests. In contrast, a number of Democrats believed that an American commitment on the ground in the Middle East would help with other issues in the region. Views about the mission in Lebanon grew out of an assessment of its effectiveness—not its morality. Tactics, not ideology, fueled the U.S. debate. The familiar positions on U.S. military involvement did not emerge because they were irrelevant. Aid to Lebanon appeared in American eyes humanitarian more than ideological; U.S. soldiers were seen to help end anarchy and for once enjoyed the role of peacekeepers, not partisans.

This particular case illustrates a larger point: the Middle East (meaning here, the area from Egypt to Iran) stands outside the great debate of American foreign policy since World War II—the disagreement over the danger posed by the U.S.S.R. Briefly put, “foreign policy conservatives” see the Soviet danger as preeminent and view almost every facet of international relations through the prism of the Soviet threat. They interpret critical political divi-

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sions along East–West lines and believe that nearly all major external problems facing the United States are related to this dichotomy. For conservatives, the basic goal of U.S. foreign policy is to contain the threat posed by a heavily armed and expansionist Soviet Union. The urgency of this problem gives it precedence over other challenges, both foreign and domestic; conservatives are therefore willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to build powerful armed forces.

“Foreign policy liberals,” on the contrary, see the Soviet threat as only one of many problems confronting the United States. In place of the conservatives’ bipolar vision, liberals recognize a more varied array of concerns. If conservatives see a Soviet hand behind most problems confronting the U.S., liberals argue for the primacy of local concerns such as tyranny, poverty, local wars, overpopulation, ecology, and runaway technology. Liberals see less need for spending on U.S. military forces and argue instead for greater attention to domestic concerns. To use the metaphor of Archilochus, liberals are like the fox, for they know many things; but conservatives are like the hedgehog, for they know one big thing.

Central America is the most recent battlefield for conservative and liberal principles. In the past, these differences have informed the controversy over American involvement in NATO, in Korea, and in Vietnam. Today, the same disagreements are very much alive. In Europe, they shape the U.S. approach to talks on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces and on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions. With regard to Africa, how a person feels about the Soviet threat colors his appreciation of South Africa as a source of minerals, as the possessor of a key strategic passage, and as a friend of the West; it also influences his view about the Namibia talks. And in East Asia, different opinions about the need to balance Soviet might are reflected in views on the urgency of building relations with Peking. Knowing where an American stands on the right/left continuum makes it possible to predict with fair certainty how he feels about current problems in all these areas of the world; it also suggests what he thinks U.S. policy in those regions should be.

The Middle East, to be sure, is not completely outside the great struggle of the age; conservative and liberal viewpoints do extend to there as well. As John C. Campbell writes, conservatives looking at the Middle East hold that the Soviets have long been pursuing relentlessly a strategy aimed at driving America out of the region, dominating its peoples, controlling its oil, and using these gains to shift the global balance and bring the West to its knees. . . . [To the contrary, liberals discount] both the Soviet aim of domi-

nating the Middle East and the Soviet capability of determining what happens there. The motive forces on the local scene are national and regional, so runs the argument, and the Soviet leaders, while winning friends when and where they can, are primarily concerned with security and stability on their frontiers and with keeping rival powers at a safe distance.¹

These views are exactly consistent with conservative and liberal positions regarding other areas of the world; what makes the Middle East different is the fact that, there, they are not the critical debate. Issues local to the Middle East, the Arab–Israeli dispute in particular, overwhelm conservative/liberal controversies. Ideology fades as one approaches the Eastern Mediterranean; political discussion there is dominated by an entirely different—and, I shall argue, wholly unrelated—dichotomy. That the Middle East debate in the U.S. is unique will first be documented, then explained; finally, the consequences of this anomaly will be considered.

Americans Dispute the Middle East

The pro-Arab² and the pro-Israel camps argue their cases with great resources and passion. In the context of mainstream American politics, their views may be characterized as follows: Arab sympathizers argue that the Middle East's problems can be attributed to the existence of Israel. In support of this contention, they point to the radicalizing effects of Palestinian nationalism in the 1920s, of the creation of Israel in 1948, and of the subsequent Arab–Israeli wars. Were it not for Israel, their argument posits, the Arab countries would be far more stable; and were it not for American and European support for Israel, Arab states would be far more pro-Western. Israel prevents the Arabs from enjoying political stability and obstructs close relations with the United States.

Israeli sympathizers argue very nearly the reverse. They see the conflict with Israel as a symptom of Arab instability, not its cause; this argument therefore stresses internal conditions in the Arab countries. A primitive version ascribes the Arab problem to irrationality and venom; a more thoughtful approach ascribes the problem to endemic disorders, such as the legacy of

1. John C. Campbell, "Has the Red Tide Ebbed?," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 37 (1983), p. 468.

2. "Pro-Arab" in this article also includes those Americans who mainly take an anti-Israel position.

traditional political systems, the burden of the colonial experience, and the demands of modernization. In either view, Israel is seen as little more than the vehicle for the expression of inter-Arab relations, with the implication that even if Israel were to disappear, Arab politics would remain unchanged, as would relations with the West.

Each view also implies a policy prescription. If Israel created the problem, then the burden must be on it to make changes to resolve that problem. There is a wide variety of opinion about the nature of those changes—from the most extreme solution of eliminating Israel to the mildest one of stopping Jerusalem's settlement policy in the West Bank and Gaza—but in every case, the pro-Arab perspective is defined by the view that the burden of finding a solution lies on Israel. This has two implications: first, it stresses the role of the Palestinians, portraying them as the victims of the powerful Israeli state. Second, it ascribes great consequences to the Arab-Israeli conflict, seeing it as a critical element in the price of oil, in the relations of every Arab country with the U.S., in the opportunities for American businesses in the Arab world, and in provoking Soviet-American confrontation.

Those sympathetic to Israel argue that the burden of change lies with the Arabs—not so much the Palestinians, who are viewed as pawns, but with the Arab states. In this view, the problem lies in the Arab rulers' need to use Israel as a means to work out their own problems. The unwillingness of the Iraqi or Libyan government to recognize Israel, the argument goes, has nothing to do with their concern for the Palestinians and everything to do with political needs—domestic, pan-Arab, and international. If the pro-Arab faction wishes to compel Israel to accommodate the Palestinians, the pro-Israel side wants the Arab states to accept Israel as a normal state.

There is no escaping this dichotomy; even those Americans who would do so find that they must choose sides. Of the many efforts to articulate an "even-handed" approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, not one has satisfied the adherents of both points of view. One such effort is to advocate mutual recognition: the Arab states accept Israel and Israel accepts the P.L.O. But the equality here is illusory; a firmly established state recognizing the irredentist movement long intent on its destruction is desirable from the pro-Arab standpoint but is not acceptable to Israel's supporters. (Further, this proposal ignores the fact that two other Arab parties—the governments of Jordan and Syria—also lay claim to the land Israel holds, and are thus rivals of the P.L.O.) No one has yet succeeded in balancing the concerns of the two parties; every plan ultimately must place the burden of change either on

the Arabs or Israel. Whoever has feelings about Middle East policies must willy-nilly sympathize with one side.

This sympathy in turn influences how one sees other policy issues in the area. Many Middle East developments of great international importance are virtually unconnected to Arab–Israeli affairs—the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian revolution, the Iraq–Iran war, growing OPEC deficits, the Cyprus conflict, the Western Sahara war. Nonetheless, the Arab–Israeli conflict dominates American thinking about the Middle East to such an extent that viewpoints on most other regional issues are also defined along Arab–Israeli lines.

For example, positions in the debate over the value of Saudi Arabia as an ally for the U.S. are largely a function of the Arab–Israeli conflict. The pro-Arab side points to the enduring U.S.–Saudi relationship, the two countries' important business ties, and the strong anti-communist outlook of the Saudi leaders. Pro-Israel sympathizers argue that Saudi Arabia is politically fragile, that its foreign policy often goes contrary to American interests, and that its relations with the U.S. are based on expediency rather than shared values. One faction points to the need to maintain close relations with the Saudis as a way to ensure oil supplies; the other argues that the supply of oil depends not on diplomatic relations but on market forces and secure supply lines.

In more general terms, the pro-Arab side encourages American ties to all the Arab states, whereas the pro-Israel side prefers ties to the non-Arab states of the Middle East, such as Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, or those Arab states willing to make peace with Israel, such as Egypt and Lebanon. Reflecting these views, the pro-Arab side pressures the U.S. government to support Iraq in its war with Iran and the pro-Israel faction stresses the advantages of ties to Iran; U.S.–Iranian relations being frozen by the Iranians, Israeli sympathizers opt for U.S. neutrality. Similar divisions polarize opinions on such issues as building an infrastructure for the Central Command (the former Rapid Deployment Force) and preparing for energy shortages.

The Arab–Israeli conflict even shapes the line of argument about the security of oil supplies. The pro-Arab faction portrays Israel as the leading reason for turmoil in the Middle East, the agent most likely to foment revolution in the oil states. The pro-Israel faction argues that Israel serves as a reliable ally to the West in an otherwise volatile region; it suggests that should oil supplies be jeopardized, Israel would be uniquely positioned to aid or even initiate military operations.

Relations with the Soviet Union are divided in similar ways. The pro-Arab camp argues that the Arab states will stand solidly with the West once the U.S. stops backing Israel; then, lacking local friends, the Soviets would no longer be in a position to confront the U.S. in the Middle East. Pro-Israelis contrast Israel's military capabilities and political stability with the weakness and volatility of the Arab states. They assume that regimes friendly to the U.S.S.R. will continue to exist in the Middle East regardless of U.S. relations with Israel; therefore, Washington should strengthen its most reliable ally.

The pro-Arab argument posits a zero-sum situation: any improvement in ties with Israel harms relations with the Arab countries. The pro-Israel side argues the opposite, that improved relations with Israel foster stronger influence over the Arab states as well.

The fact that the Arab-Israeli conflict so dominates debate about the whole Middle East in the U.S. means, ironically, that Americans ascribe greater importance to this conflict than do the peoples of the Middle East. Observers on the scene appreciate a wider variety of factors (declining oil revenues, fundamentalist Islam, and intra-Arab border problems), and their ears are better attuned to discount rhetoric. Opinion at a distance, however, tends to focus on the largest and most contentious issue. Subtleties tend to get lost as problems become simplified and abstracted. Thus, debate over the Middle East in the U.S. is more bifurcated than it is in the Middle East itself.

The Unimportance of Being Liberal or Conservative

Israeli and Arab sympathizers are found across the spectrum of mainstream American political life, without reference to party affiliation, philosophical standpoint, or global foreign policy objectives.³ Conservatives friendly to Israel point to the country's usefulness against the Soviet Union; pro-Israel liberals note its democracy and high moral standards. Pro-Arab conservatives stress the importance of oil and business ties; liberals friendly to the Arabs emphasize the suffering of Palestinians. The Arab-Israeli conflict contains

3. Outside the mainstream of American political life, however, there is less diversity, for the extreme right and left are both pro-Arab. Their reasons range from explicit anti-Semitism to antagonism towards Israel as an outpost of Western imperialism. Interestingly, a clear pattern also exists among politically involved Middle East specialists: conservatives tend to be pro-Israel and liberals pro-Arab.

variety enough so that every American can find something there to suit his political views.

Liberals and conservatives support Israel versus the Arabs in similar proportions. Survey data collected by the Gallup Organization on behalf of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations confirm this observation: according to 1982 figures, persons who call themselves conservatives sympathize with Israel over the Arabs by a ratio of 2.73 to one; middle-of-the-road Americans tallied 2.89 to one, and liberals 2.84 to one—differences that are statistically insignificant.⁴ Looking at a specific event, the U.S. public disapproved of Israel's 1982 actions in Lebanon by almost the identical percentages: 56.2 percent for conservatives, 56.5 for middle-of-the-road, and 56.7 for liberals.⁵ This similarity is particularly striking, given the wide disparity between conservatives and liberals on the use of force by the United States.

Within this overall uniformity, however, it is virtually impossible to predict how an American views the Middle East. Conservatism does not predispose him to favor one side, nor does liberalism. Indeed, all four possible combinations are well represented: conservative pro-Arab, conservative pro-Israel, liberal pro-Arab, and liberal pro-Israel.

Columnists, for example, span the four categories. Among those who are pro-Arab, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak are conservative and Anthony Lewis is a liberal; among the pro-Israel columnists are the conservative George Will and the liberal Morton Kondracke. Journals of opinion divide in similar ways: the *National Review* is conservative and pro-Israel, while *The New Republic* is liberal and pro-Israel. Among newspapers, the conservative *Chicago Tribune* and the liberal *Christian Science Monitor* are pro-Arab; the conservative *Wall Street Journal* and the liberal *New York Times* are pro-Israel. Among think tanks, the conservative American Enterprise Institute and the liberal Carnegie Endowment are pro-Arab, whereas the conservative Heritage Foundation is pro-Israel.

Prominent figures who have taken pronounced stands on the Arab–Israeli issue come from all points of the political landscape. For example, the pro-

4. The figures are 50.5 and 18.5 percent for conservatives, 46.8 and 16.2 percent for middle-of-the-road, and 54.3 and 19.1 percent for liberals. These numbers derive from *Attitudes of the American Public and Selected Opinion Leaders Related to Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Gallup, 1983), p. 542. Sampling tolerances are explained on pp. a19–a21.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 552. The percentages of approval range more widely: 25 percent for conservatives, 20.9 for middle-of-the-road, and 18.8 for liberals.

Arab side includes conservatives Spiro Agnew, John Connolly, and Caspar Weinberger; liberals J. William Fulbright, Andrew Young, and George Ball; radicals Noam Chomsky and Jesse Jackson.

The U.S. Congress counts many outspoken friends of Israel and friends of the Arabs. In the current Senate, Israel receives staunch backing from foreign policy liberals⁶ such as Joseph Biden, Alan Cranston, Christopher Dodd, Gary Hart, Daniel Inouye, Edward Kennedy, and Paul Sarbanes on the Democratic side and from Arlen Specter and Lowell Weicker on the Republican. Strongly pro-Israel moderates include Republicans such as John Danforth, Dave Durenberger, John Heinz, and Bob Packwood. Pro-Israel conservatives number Democrats Robert Byrd and Jim Sasser, Republicans Alfonse D'Amato, Rudy Boschwitz, Paula Hawkins, and Bob Kasten.

Strong support for the Arabs is less common but also unconnected to ideology. If pro-Arab senators are all Republicans, including the liberal Mark Hatfield, middle-of-the-road Charles Percy, and conservatives Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond, liberal Democrats in the House of Representatives are the most numerous, including John Conyers, George Crockett, Mary Rose Oakar, and Nick Rahall.

As this listing indicates, election platforms to the contrary, there is no Republican or Democratic position on the Middle East. In confirmation, an opinion survey of Council on Foreign Relations members taken in December 1982 shows no substantial difference between respondents belonging to the two parties. (There are two unexpected exceptions, however. Democrats are more than twice as likely to call the maintenance of Israel's security "very important" for U.S. interests; Republicans feel more strongly about the need to contain the influence of such rulers as Khomeini and Qaddafi.)⁷ The Chicago survey shows that Democrats sympathize with Israel in a ratio of 3.37 to one, somewhat more than the Republicans with 2.99 to one, a difference that is statistically insignificant.⁸

6. Conservative, middle-of-the-road, and liberal designations are based on figures for 1982 published in *The Baron Report*, No. 176, May 5, 1983. These ratings of congressional voting distinguish between economic issues, social/governmental issues, and foreign policy/defense issues; only the last are considered here. Members of Congress with ratings of under 33, I call conservative; with 34–66, middle-of-the-road; and with 67–100, liberal. The pro-Israel and pro-Arab classifications here and elsewhere are my own, based on widespread discussions.

7. Rolland Bushner, ed., *United States Policy and the Middle East* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1983), p. 10.

8. Gallup, *Attitudes*, p. 542. The figures are 51.7 and 15.3 percent for Democrats, and 53.2 and 17.8 percent for Republicans.

Pro-Arab conservatives and pro-Israel liberals tacitly agree on one diagonal alignment, while pro-Arab liberals and pro-Israel conservatives believe in the opposite one. Conservative businessmen and liberal Democratic Senators running for President agree that it is natural and logically consistent that to be conservative is to be pro-Arab and to be liberal is to be pro-Israel. Radical editors of *The Nation* and the neo-conservative editors of *Commentary* agree on precisely the opposite alignment. At the same time, conservatives and liberals do cooperate on Middle East issues; the pro-Arab and pro-Israel lobbies are probably the most thoroughly bipartisan efforts on Capitol Hill.

The absence of ideological viewpoint on the Middle East makes for great confusion, as Antony T. Sullivan indicated in a recent article in *The University Bookman*, a conservative journal. In a discussion of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, he notes that "sadly, the Said volume has received a generally hostile reception from 'conservatives,' especially those who revolve in the orbits of *The New Republic* and *Commentary* magazines."⁹ Of a pro-Arab bent himself, Mr. Sullivan is distressed to find pro-Israel sentiments flourishing among conservative publications; the use of quotes around the word "conservative" would imply that he considers the pro-Israel position inherently liberal. In this light, it is ironic to note that Said's study is a radical leftist critique of Western attitudes towards the Middle East—not the sort of book a conservative would usually leap to defend. That a conservative should praise it shows again how odd are the passions over Middle East politics. Further, *The New Republic* is well known as a journal of liberal opinion; that Mr. Sullivan calls it conservative probably indicates that he, concerned specifically with Arab-Israeli issues, lumps that journal into the same category as *Commentary*.

In addition, many Americans, including those in government, adopt Middle East policies that are inconsistent with their global views. It is easiest to see this in the case of members of Congress, who put their views on the record when they vote. Pro-Israel liberals, instinctively opposed to arms transfers elsewhere in the world, call for increased sales to Israel; Congressman Michael Barnes finds himself in this position. Similarly, foes of a U.S. military involvement abroad, such as Senator Christopher Dodd, support the presence of American troops in the Sinai and Lebanon. Foreign policy con-

9. Antony T. Sullivan, "A Clear View of the Middle East," *The University Bookman*, Vol. 23 (1983), pp. 65–66.

servatives like Congressman Jack Kemp, who normally begrudge foreign aid, favor its increase in the case of Israel.

Advocates of the pro-Arab side adopt equally odd positions. Despite the military advantages of developing a strategic relationship with Israel against the Soviet Union, conservatives friendly to the Arabs reject this out of hand, on the assumption that it would irretrievably jeopardize U.S.–Arab relations. Liberals embrace Arab regimes they would elsewhere find distasteful; it is difficult to imagine their support anywhere else in the world for a monarchy such as Saudi Arabia's.

In one respect, pro-Arab conservatives and pro-Israel liberals make an exact exchange of position. Conservatives typically argue that the U.S. should stand firmly by its principles and the rest of the world will come around; liberals characteristically blame poor U.S. relations with the Third World on Washington, arguing that the U.S. needs to consider foreign views more seriously. But all this is liable to be reversed in the Middle East. Conservatives who support the Arabs stress how Arab sensibilities must be taken into account, whereas liberals who support Israel argue the need to stand by friends and maintain American principles.

It is also noteworthy that almost every American conservative supports the Labor party in Israel. To the pro-Arab conservatives, Labor is more conciliatory towards the Arabs; to the pro-Israel conservatives, it is more realistic about the effects of annexing the West Bank; and to both, it offers an alternative to the Likud leaders, towards whom many Americans feel antipathy. That the Likud party is ideologically akin to American conservatives hardly matters; the latter are nearly as eager for a Labor electoral victory as are American liberals. Israel is perhaps the only democratic country in the world where the ideology of local parties is not important to American observers. Nothing counts less for Middle East politics than the fact that Ronald Reagan and Yitzhak Shamir both favor a free market economy. It is only slightly less irrelevant that they see the Soviet Union in like ways.

Non-Alignment in the Middle East

Why are politics in the Middle East an issue apart, unrelated to the dominant debate over American foreign policy? It is not for lack of Soviet interest in the region; Moscow has been deeply involved since the mid-1950s, giving large amounts of aid, selling great arsenals, and being very active politically. The Middle East holds out the prospect of warm water ports for its navy and

of allies bordering on the Mediterranean Sea; gaining a hold over Persian Gulf oil also offers a unique possibility for exerting pressure on the West.

Soviet intentions do not differ; rather, *American concern with right/left issues is weaker with regard to the Middle East*. Two reasons explain this: the politics of the Middle East itself deemphasize ideology; and Americans have powerful non-ideological interests in the region.

To begin with, three factors reduce the impact of ideology and superpower rivalries within the Middle East: nationalism, pan-Arabism, and neutralism. The Arab-Israeli conflict being nationalist in nature, right/left questions play only a minimal role as a basis of sympathy for one side or the other. Socialism, democracy, freedom of speech—these and comparable issues are nearly absent from American discussions about the Middle East. As just noted, it is their policies towards the Arabs that define Israel's political parties in American eyes; their views on conservative/liberal issues concern almost no one in the U.S. Similarly, the fact that the Palestine Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) embraces a wide range of ideologies, from Marxist to Islamic fundamentalist, is rarely even noted. With the single, and revealing, exception of the Palestinians living in territories under Israeli occupation, human rights activists are conspicuously uninterested in the Arabs. American conservatives do not make an issue of repression by such Soviet-backed regimes as Syria and Iraq, while liberals take little interest in the abuses which occur in countries friendly to the U.S., such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Nationalist passions so inspire peoples of the region—and their partisans in the United States—that the great ideological issues of the twentieth century look pallid in comparison.

Pan-Arabism is the second factor that blunts superpower rivalry in the Middle East. The hope of uniting all Arabic speakers in a single nation under one government has political force in the twenty-one states where Arabic is the official language. Pan-Arabism calls for the repudiation of existing boundaries between Arabs in order to build a single state. Although this ideal is far from being realized, it has as much force in the Arab countries as does the dream of reunification in Ireland, Germany, China, or Korea. And just as relations between those divided nations occupy a special place in their political lives—lying somewhere between domestic and foreign affairs—so do relations among the Arab states. The fact that there are twenty-two members of the Arab League makes relations among the Arab rulers exponentially more complex than those between any of the other divided peoples. Every Arab leader feels entitled to some claim over the others' actions. Inter-

Arab relations thus reduce the sense of superpower rivalry in the Middle East by imbuing the area with a complex of political activity unrelated to the U.S. or the U.S.S.R. Espousing goals unrelated to capitalism or communism, democracy or one-party rule, pan-Arabism adds another dimension to the Soviet–American dichotomy.

Every attempt to establish a U.S. policy in the Middle East flounders on the question of how much freedom of action is enjoyed by individual Arab states. The pro-Arab and pro-Israel camps both agree that these states are less than fully autonomous actors and draw opposite conclusions. The pro-Arab view argues that common ties between the Arab countries mean that the U.S. must carefully consider the general Arab consensus before making any moves. With regard to Arab–Israeli matters, this means taking all the Arab states, including the most hard-line, into account. The pro-Israel faction notes connections among the Arab states and sees them as a sign of unreliability; how can the U.S. depend on allies none of which is entirely independent? Further complications follow: should the U.S. loosen its ties with Israel and seek Arab friendship in the hope that a weaker Israel will be less disruptive? Or should it build up a strong Israel and write off the turbulent Arab states? Pan-Arabism causes Arab states to be treated in special ways and complicates every effort to conduct a policy in the Middle East directed towards the U.S.S.R.

The Arab tendency to stay away from Soviet–American rivalries is the third factor that reduces the importance of those rivalries in the Middle East. In addition to the neutralist strain present in all regions—that is, the desire to act independently—there is a powerful element special to the Middle East, stemming from the sharp Islamic dichotomy between believers and infidels, Muslims and non-Muslims. According to Gopal Krishna, “perhaps in no other religious system has the power of antagonism toward adversaries been so successfully harnessed in the cause of communal solidarity as in Islam.”¹⁰ The Islamic sense of separateness from non-believers carries over to the political arena too, where it imbues Muslims with a particularly strong reluctance to associate closely with foreign states; and the superpowers, with their overwhelming force, are especially unwelcome.

As a result of this Islamic-based neutralism, the Middle East is the region most disengaged from the Soviet–American rivalry. While Anwar Sadat es-

10. Gopal Krishna, “Piety and Politics in Indian Islam,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s. 6 (1972), p. 144.

poused Western interests, he rejected American attempts to secure bases in Egypt and refused to sign formal agreements. Instead, he allowed only "facilities" for pre-positioned military equipment. Saudi Arabia enjoyed a close relationship with the U.S. going back to the 1930s, involving oil sales, technical assistance, and military training; nonetheless, American troops were emphatically unwelcome there after 1961. So eager were the Saudis to keep the Arabian peninsula clear of American soldiers, they offered Sultan Qabus of Oman \$1.2 billion on condition that he deny bases to the Rapid Deployment Force in 1981, replacing the sum the United States was prepared to pay him.¹¹ Also under Saudi prodding, Bahrain restricted American access to its docking facilities.

Attempts to coordinate a pro-Western regional grouping have all failed. The United States and Britain persuaded four Middle East states (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan) to sign the Baghdad Pact in 1955, hoping this would block the Soviets from the area. But the pact precipitated just the reverse: Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt responded by drawing closer to the Soviet Union, taking with him many other radicals. In Iraq itself, the accord created a furor which contributed to the leftist coup against the monarchy in July 1958. In 1981, the Reagan Administration's plans for a "strategic consensus" against the Soviet Union met an even quicker end than had the Baghdad Pact.

The Soviet Union has suffered similar problems in its efforts to win Arab allies. If anything, its troubles have been worse than America's, for Middle Eastern leaders have used the Soviet connection more as a means to balance Western influence than out of sympathy for Soviet goals. Colonel Qaddafi broke Libya's military ties to the West and turned to the U.S.S.R. for arms, even threatening on occasion to join the Warsaw Pact. But he has nevertheless assailed Marxism and pursued his own global policies, some of which (such as aid to the Afghan rebels) harmed Soviet interests. Iraqi leaders have acted in like manner; even after signing a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1972, they asserted their independence from Moscow by such means as periodically executing Iraqi Communists, buying arms from the West, and sponsoring a charter calling for the expulsion of all non-Arab forces from Arab lands. From 1955 on, the Soviet Union supplied

11. *The Washington Post*, December 2, 1981.

Egypt with arms, with the Aswan Dam, and with political support; Moscow also cancelled Egyptian debts—but had little to show for all this after 1972. In Egypt, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the theme was to take what one could and give the minimum in return.

Non-aligned nations exist everywhere, but only in the Middle East do *even the aligned nations hold back*, unwilling to aid the U.S. or U.S.S.R. more than necessary. The reluctance of a Saudi Arabia or Iraq contrasts with the behavior of aligned nations in other regions, say Thailand and Vietnam, Zaire and Mozambique, El Salvador and Cuba, or the two Koreas. Most Arabs view cooperation with the superpowers as tactical only, for their long-range goals differ too profoundly for any real common purpose. Their attitudes are comparable to those of the U.S. government's in joining forces with Stalin against Nazi Germany or in aiding China against the U.S.S.R.; these coalitions were forged in pursuit of specific goals and without expectation of lasting friendship or common motives.

Sharp local reaction often follows when an Arab government associates itself too closely with either superpower. The Iraqi monarch in 1958, the Libyan monarch in 1969, and Anwar Sadat in 1981 all succumbed to an opposition that deeply resented ties to the United States. On the other side, after Syrian leaders signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in 1980, assassinations of Soviet officials in Syria and anti-government disturbances proliferated. For this reason, Arab rulers who do choose to ally with a superpower are careful to limit the relationship and to maintain a distance. Very few Arab states—South Yemen is the principal exception—have placed themselves firmly in the camp of a superpower and stayed there (and in South Yemen this was a decision by a small minority enforced subsequently by the Soviet Union).

The impulse towards neutralism runs deep. It was epitomized by Abdul Nasser, who played off the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. against each other, knowing just how far he could go to extract maximum benefits from both sides. Many other Middle East leaders, such as the Algerians and North Yemenis, then emulated Abdul Nasser. Repeatedly, Arabs tried to reap the benefits of being protected by a superpower without committing themselves to its ideology or bloc.

As a result, the Arabs appear non-aligned even when they take clear positions against the United States. In the latter part of June 1983, Hafez al-Assad, the ruler of Syria, observed that:

The USSR is a friendly country supporting the Arabs and their issues. It stands at our side and strongly supports us in our just battle against the Israeli aggression, which is fully supported by the United States militarily, economically, politically and in other fields.¹²

At about the same time, Yasir Arafat addressed the World Assembly for Peace and Against Nuclear War in Prague in the following manner:

The fate of all mankind today is being subjected to a real test as a result of the insane plans of American imperialism, which is striving to escalate further the worldwide arms race and the production of new weapons of mass destruction. . . . Today we are witnessing how foreign imperialist wars are again being unleashed by America. We see this in Honduras, El Salvador, in the attacks against Nicaragua, and we see it in Lebanon with the dispatch of American military units.¹³

Anyone else who expressed such sentiments at a Soviet-bloc rally would be seen as both a communist sympathizer and an agent of the U.S.S.R. But not so Arafat; nothing he says or does makes him an ideological figure in American eyes. Syria and the P.L.O. may use Soviet arms, receive Soviet financial aid, and enjoy Soviet diplomatic backing, but they are nonetheless reluctant to be seen as being fully in the Soviet camp. They may spread conspiracy theories about the U.S., attack American interests, and even blow up an American embassy, but they wish to remain outside the Soviet–American contest.

Arab neutralism has the effect of splintering opinion in the United States along Arab–Israeli lines. In the pro-Arab view, it implies that no Arab leader is entirely beholden to the U.S.S.R.; in the pro-Israel view, it makes all Arab leaders suspect as friends of the U.S.

Oil and Religion: Special Interests for Americans

Reasons pertaining to the United States are also key to explaining why Middle East politics fall outside the usual conservative/liberal debate. Financial, security, and religious interests are so powerful that they divert attention away from ideological concerns and towards the issues particular to the region.

Trade in oil, the largest and most profitable industry in the world, offers extraordinary opportunities for financial gain; and Arab states dominate the

12. *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, Vol. 5, June 24, 1983, pp. H1–2.

13. *Ibid.*, June 27, 1983, p. A15.

export of oil. Commerce in the Middle East provides spectacular profits not just to oil companies, but to financiers, manufacturers, shippers, traders, arms merchants, engineers, builders, architects, lawyers, scientists, advertisers, and even government agencies. The possibility of making a fortune attracts Americans of all ideological persuasions, conservatives and liberals alike, and has nothing to do with communism, Soviet imperialism, or U.S. security.

Good relations between oil-exporting states and the U.S. are seen as critical to successful business deals, and this in turn is often seen as a function of attitudes towards the Arab–Israeli conflict. American businesses have therefore devoted their greatest and most sustained lobbying efforts to influencing U.S. policy in favor of the Arab cause. A prime example of their power was the 1981 decision by the Senate to allow the sale of the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia. Working on the assumption that refusal to sell these aircraft would jeopardize their own profits, thousands of businesses with interests in Saudi Arabia, no matter how minor or indirect, participated in a campaign to influence Senators. Organized by such corporate giants as Bechtel, Westinghouse, and United Technologies, they helped persuade the Senate to go along with President Reagan’s wishes to sell these aircraft: “The corporate lobby was decisive in . . . reversing the overwhelming opposition to the sale that had existed only a week before the vote. . . . The effort to obtain Senate approval of the sale produced the most extensive involvement by the American business community in any major foreign policy decision since World War II.”¹⁴ Principal objections came from organizations sympathetic to Israel. Both sides made mention of the Soviet Union (those in favor saw the sale as enhancing American military capabilities; those against it stressed the dangers of putting advanced technology in the hands of a shaky regime). This was, however, a secondary issue, exploited to convince the public, and of tangential importance to the contestants. The AWACS fight cut clean across conservative/liberal lines.

This controversy also demonstrated how ferocious debate over the Middle East can be, for each side suspected the other of the very worst motives and impugned its patriotism. Jews were accused of putting Israel’s interests ahead of those of the United States; businessmen were accused of placing private gain ahead of the national good. Such attacks were plausible enough to

14. Steven Emerson, “The Petrodollar Connection,” *The New Republic*, February 17, 1982, pp. 23, 18.

poison the debate about AWACS; they even affected the outcome, for at least one senator, William Cohen, voted in favor of the sale out of fear that, if it were rejected, Israel would be made a "scapegoat" and an anti-Semitic backlash would follow.¹⁵

After money comes concern about the security of oil supplies. With more than half of the globe's proven petroleum reserves, the Middle East has an unparalleled economic importance for the U.S. and its allies; no other non-industrial area provides the West with a commodity as central or irreplaceable as the Middle East. Although dependence on imported oil has been much reduced in recent years, sustained disruption of Middle East supplies could cause global depression and a radical shift in the balance of power.

Although the Soviet Union could block oil exports from the Persian Gulf, Americans perceive the greatest threat to oil supplies as coming from within the Middle East itself. This is implied by the results of the Council on Foreign Relations membership survey of December 1982. When asked about the most important issue for the U.S. in the Middle East, 46 percent answered "securing supplies of Saudi and Persian Gulf oil at stable prices"; only 39 percent considered "restricting the Soviet Union's influence in the region" paramount.¹⁶ Consistent with this, the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations opinion survey shows that the American leadership views the Middle East as the region with the second most urgent problems, just after relations with the U.S.S.R.; and the American public goes even further, considering Middle East issues the outstanding foreign policy problem.¹⁷ Thus do issues related to oil security increase the importance of internal Middle East disputes, not the role of the Soviet Union in the area.

As for religion, it is the very key to understanding American feelings about Middle East politics. Monotheism originated in the Middle East, a fact that permanently accords the region special significance. "Religion" includes theological, social, and psychological factors, such as being a fundamentalist

15. *The New York Times*, October 29, 1981.

16. Bushner, *United States Policy*, p. 2.

17. John Rielly, ed., *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1983* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1983), p. 12. Fifty-one percent called the area very important, "justifying financial outlays, but involving U.S. forces only on a peacekeeping basis"; 13 percent called it important, that is, "not worth larger financial outlays than now and not justifying involvement of any U.S. combat forces"; and a mere 1 percent considered it of limited importance, advocating "reduced financial outlays and withdrawal of U.S. peacekeeping forces." In a similar survey taken in 1978, both the public and the leadership agreed on the Middle East being of greatest concern.

Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew, feeling the legacy of Christian animosity towards Islam, anti-Semitism, or Jewish self-hatred.

The interest of American Jews in the Middle East is self-evident; after many centuries of experience with the problems of statelessness, most Jews consider their standing as a people to be bound up with the State of Israel. It has been observed, with some justification, that Israel has become the religion of American Jews. Many of them have a personal involvement in Israel's fate that exceeds their interest in any other foreign policy issue. Jewish organizations work assiduously on Israel's behalf and have become a powerful lobby; the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has a reputation as "perhaps the most effective pressure group in Washington."¹⁸ For Jews, this allegiance to Israel has almost nothing to do with right/left ideology.

Christian concern with events in the Middle East is less direct but also powerful. As the birthplace of Christianity and the home of the early church, the Holy Land is a special place for every believer. The Middle East may be remote, exotic, and incomprehensible, but it is not alien and it is never without interest, for its places and peoples are familiar. Yet more important than this, however, are long-standing relationships with both Jews and Muslims. The inexhaustible Christian fascination with Jews stems in part from the fact that Christianity developed out of the Jewish faith and in part from the fact that until the early modern period, Jews were the only non-Christians most Europeans ever encountered. The preoccupation of medieval Europe continued to be felt in subsequent times and even crossed the Atlantic. Theologically and historically prominent, Jews have often been of intense, even morbid, concern to Christians. In recent years, the special status of the Jewish people has been transferred to the Jewish state, and Israel has inherited the ancient conspicuousness.

As a result, Israel has what may be termed the highest per capita fame quotient of any country in the world: based on the size of its population, Americans know more about Israel than any other country. One indication is that educated Americans know more Israeli politicians by name than those of any other country, including even Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Small events in Israel which in other countries would be ignored—a doctor's strike or tension between religious and non-religious factions—receive international attention. Such features of daily life as the *kibbutzim*, inflation,

18. *The Washington Post*, April 10, 1984.

Ashkenazi–Sephardic differences, and West Bank settlement policies have a unique prominence in the American press.

Fascination with Israel then spills over to its neighbors and enemies. The Lebanese massacred each other for years without attracting the attention of the world press; only when Israeli troops were in some way involved, as at Sabra and Shatila, did the outside world take note. The leader of every minor Palestinian faction is a newsworthy figure whose remarks are broadcast around the world. Anwar Sadat became a hero in the U.S. because he made peace with Israel; is it conceivable that peace with any other country would have touched Americans so deeply? Not just Israel, but everyone connected to it shares the international spotlight.¹⁹

Muslims too have a special place in the Christian consciousness, also the result of a relationship that goes back to medieval times. From about the seventh to the fifteenth centuries, Muslims were virtually the only peoples outside the continent of Europe familiar to Europeans. Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Africans, and Amerindians came into view much later and under very different circumstances. Muslims stand out in the European worldview: the relationship between the two goes back much farther, it was more consistently hostile (the Arab expansion, the Crusades, the Turkish conquests), Muslims were the strongest non-Christians to threaten Europe militarily, they were the only ones to challenge it religiously and culturally, and they resisted imperial conquest with greater tenacity. All this inspired a hostility which became an established feature of Western civilization. The animosity it engendered also crossed the Atlantic. To this day, Americans have a stronger visceral reaction to Muslims than to any other Asian or African peoples.²⁰

In addition to Jews and Christians, Muslims also view the Middle East as the heartland of their religion, and this too has direct political importance. Worldwide Muslim concern with the Arab–Israeli conflict and support for the Palestinians owe much to the fact that Israel and its neighbors constitute the center of Muslim life. While there are few Muslims in the United States, this often-missed aspect of the Arab–Israeli relationship adds to the international prominence of the conflict and thus indirectly contributes to its significance for Americans.

19. On this, see my article, "The Media and the Middle East," *Commentary*, June 1984, pp. 29–34.

20. This is documented in my study, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 13–15, 82–88, 173–176.

In brief, the depth of concern aroused by Middle East developments has no parallel in other regions of the non-Western world. Compassion and alarm may attend events in Cambodia or Uganda, but those are remote places detached from the Western experience in a way that the Middle East is not. Religious emotions thus permeate not only the politics of the Middle East, but also the way Americans see this region.

Profits and oil security have importance, to be sure; but the decisive factor that causes Americans to choose sides in the Arab–Israeli conflict is religion. Proof that the religious factor is critical lies in the fact that the goals of the pro-Arab and pro-Israel camps—to improve American relations with Israel or harm them—are almost never subject to an exact calculation of the costs and benefits of that relationship. Regardless of what is publicly maintained, this is one issue where personal feelings invariably outweigh concern about national interests.

Many examples demonstrate this point. Ronald Reagan came into office in 1981 with a mandate to increase American military strength, and the Israel lobby responded by stressing Israel’s military value to the U.S.²¹ Were circumstances to change, and Israel lost this value, its partisans would find some other issue to justify their support.²² Or were a foreign policy liberal elected President, the moral qualities of the relationship with Israel would again receive the most emphasis. The bulk of Israel’s support in the U.S. has nothing to do with its utility.

The same applies to the pro-Arab side. For thirty-seven years, officials in the State Department have warned politicians that pro-Israel policies alienate Arab leaders, jeopardize U.S. relations with them, and may cause them to throw in their lot with the Soviet Union. This argument ignores the actual situation, which is much more subtle: Israel’s presence has in fact had a very mixed effect on Arab relations with Moscow. It has deepened the dependence of those Arab leaders intent on destroying Israel militarily, because they can only do this with Soviet arms. On the other hand, Arabs who accept Israel’s

21. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee began a series in 1982 on U.S.–Israel relations, featuring such titles as “The Strategic Value of Israel,” “Israel and the U.S. Air Force,” and “Israel and the U.S. Navy.”

22. This is what happened in France: so long as France was fighting a war in Algeria, Israel was a useful instrument of French policy against the Arabs. But when Algeria became independent, Israel’s usefulness came to an end and France thereafter favored the Arab states. Pro-Israel Frenchmen responded by emphasizing their country’s moral commitments to the Jewish state.

existence and wish to extract concessions from it find they must cultivate the U.S., the one country with real influence over Israel. As the years pass, the majority of Arab states have taken the second route, and Israel's influence has become increasingly positive for the U.S. For every Syria or Libya that still plots Israel's extinction with Soviet help, there are many more states—Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—that cultivate good relations with the U.S. largely because of Israel's might.

In similar fashion, business interests promote the notion that American trade with the Arab countries depends on political harmony, implying fewer ties to Israel. Even in the absence of evidence that Americans have lost more than token amounts of business on account of their government's relations with Israel, this thesis continues to gather powerful support.

A Wild Card in the U.S. Debate

The fact that the Middle East does not fit into the usual ideological categories has major implications for the formation and execution of U.S. policy.

During campaigns for the Presidency, voters know almost nothing about the candidates' real positions on the Arab-Israeli issue. In part, this is because the importance of Jewish electoral support tempts almost every candidate to appear pro-Israel during a campaign, while the constraints of diplomacy push him towards a pro-Arab stance once elected. In part, this confusion is due to the absence of ideology on this issue, permitting a candidate to take any position he pleases. The perennial gulf between campaign promises and actions in office is thus magnified with regard to the Middle East.

Matters remain just as confusing when one candidate wins. Relations with the U.S.S.R. (along with the nation's economy) having formed the cornerstone of American Presidential campaigns since 1948, every administration enters office with an articulated point of view on ideological issues. The Middle East, for all the attention paid it, ranks far less important in this regard; with few exceptions, American voters do not select a candidate with the Arab-Israeli conflict in mind. Thus, the newly elected President, who will have received a mandate for an approach to relations with the U.S.S.R., will likely not have one for the Middle East. What policies he chooses to pursue there are very much in question after he wins the election.

The transition period has particular importance, for it is then that staff appointments are made. Personnel decisions have greater impact on policy

because, in contrast with the usual agreement concerning East–West issues, there is no generally shared viewpoint among the political appointees regarding the Middle East. With regard to the Soviet Union, most of the differences between senior aides have to do with tactics: a secretary of defense may differ on details of the military budget with the secretary of state, but their argument normally involves relatively small issues. Exceptions occur—as in the Carter Administration, when the secretary of state and the national security adviser espoused contrary viewpoints—only when the President self-consciously chooses so.

In contrast, disagreement on the Middle East is not planned. Opinions on this issue being unrelated to ideology, they are therefore personal and virtually random. Voters do not know who will be picked for key positions or what their views are on the Arab–Israeli conflict. The President-elect selects his foreign policy aides primarily with an eye to East–West issues and without much regard to their views on the Middle East; therefore, how they feel about the Middle East is a matter of chance. For this reason, an administration's policy towards the Middle East is in large part a by-product of its personnel.

The absence of a consensus about the Middle East implies a greater degree of contention in formulating policy than occurs regarding other regions. Every administration typically includes top officials espousing irreconcilable opinions about Middle East issues. At one extreme, some see Israeli and American interests as being so similar that they are nearly identical; at the other are those figures who act as though their ambition is, after government service, to be hired as Saudi lobbyists. Advocates of the pro-Arab and pro-Israel viewpoints, lodged in all parts of the government, never stop skirmishing. It was precisely this issue that precipitated the resignation of Alexander Haig as secretary of state in June 1982. In my experience at the State Department, I found contention over Middle East issues the deepest and the most impassioned. At the Policy Planning Staff, I was struck by the fact that, of all the regional bureaus, relations were least cooperative with the one handling Middle East affairs. Working for the Counselor, I found that whatever touched on Arab–Israeli issues stirred up the strongest disagreements.

This sort of contention leads to erratic policy. Decisions depend on who prevails in the bureaucratic struggles, a process that can be seen in the current administration where the secretaries of defense and state differ on such issues as the value of making gestures to Saudi Arabia and of building a strategic

relationship with Israel. Changes in personnel sometimes lead to basic shifts of approach: in the top-level foreign affairs substitutions of the Reagan Administration—the secretary of state and the national security adviser—the sharpest differences of view concerned, not surprisingly, Arab–Israeli affairs.

The result of such contention is to disperse power to the bureaucrats and the lobbies. Bureaucrats gain because new administrations, lacking an ideological viewpoint on the Middle East, have little incentive to bring in fresh faces at the working level of government. There is therefore less housecleaning at the beginning of a new administration, and it is easier for those already in place to stay on in positions of authority. Republicans and Democrats do not have cadres of Middle East specialists as they do for the U.S.S.R. and other important regions. Political appointees are especially few in number in the bureau that handles Middle East affairs. The power of careerists increases relative to that of political appointees and greater continuity can be found at the lower levels of government. These factors account for the homogeneity of the so-called Arabists at the State Department as well as their legendary hold over Department policy.

Lobbies also gain. Put positively, there is special scope for citizen participation and influence in the debate about American policy in the Middle East. Put negatively, the national interest has exceptionally little role; the absence of ideology increases the role of parochial considerations, notably religious emotions and business pressures. This is especially the case in Congress, where votes on the Middle East are particularly susceptible to arm-twisting.

Patterns of support on Middle East issues tend to be temporary. As predominantly leftist mainline Protestant churches reduced their backing for Israel in the 1970s, the slack was taken up by right-wing evangelicals. By now, the National Council of Churches routinely condemns Israeli actions, while the Reverend Jerry Falwell and other fundamentalist leaders are in regular contact with the Israeli Prime Minister. Out of gratitude for Jewish help in the civil rights movement, black groups once solidly supported Israel. In more recent years, however, divergences over affirmative action, the lure of petrodollars, and identification with Third World causes led to a reorientation, and black leaders became among the most vocal supporters of the Arab cause.

In doing this, it is revealing to note, the blacks ally with multinational corporations, their polar opposites and normally their political adversaries. Herein lies another peculiarity of Middle East politics: it induces otherwise

unfriendly elements to work together. In the Congress, for example, it breaks up the usual alignments of liberals and conservatives, replacing them with single-issue coalitions attracting support from across the political spectrum. By defusing the all-consuming polarity of right/left politics, shaking up old procedures and spurring new alignments, the Middle East offers a unique opportunity to break out of the usual constraints on foreign policy issues.

A major example of this took place in the spring of 1983, when the Reagan Administration attempted to win the support of pro-Israel liberals for its policies in Central America. This campaign began when the State Department released a document on May 18 which noted the Sandinistas' "longstanding" ties with the P.L.O. and the "significant amounts" of Libyan arms and training to the Nicaraguan government.²³ Secretary of State Shultz, addressing Congress the next day, pursued an analogy between the two areas as part of an effort to win aid for El Salvador: "Can you imagine negotiating in the Middle East if Israel was weak, unarmed and unable to account for itself? The same thing applies to other areas."²⁴ In June, President Reagan remarked before the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League: "It is no coincidence that the same forces which are destabilizing the Middle East—the Soviet Union, Libya, the PLO—are also working hand in glove with Cuba to destabilize Central America. And I'd like to urge you to support this nation's efforts to help our friends in Central America."²⁵ By linking the Soviet bloc to the P.L.O. and Libya, the Administration attempted to appeal to pro-Israel liberals.

A Unique Area of U.S. Policy

The non-ideological approach to Middle East affairs affects the actual course of U.S. policy in several ways. Because the Middle East is not seen by Americans to be dominated by U.S. and Soviet interests, swings in policy towards the Soviet Union do not affect the Middle East. Liberal policies during the Carter Administration and conservative ones during the Reagan years have had profound influence on the U.S. posture everywhere in the

23. Department of State, *Communist, PLO and Libyan Support for Nicaragua and the Salvadoran Insurgents*, May 18, 1983.

24. *The New York Times*, May 20, 1983.

25. *The Jerusalem Post International Edition*, June 19–25, 1983.

world but in the Middle East. Questions of a Palestinian homeland, recognition of the P.L.O., and the sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia have virtually nothing to do with the larger questions of U.S. policy.

The American public not being polarized along conservative and liberal lines, the U.S. government has greater flexibility to use U.S. soldiers in the area. Twenty million dollars in U.S. aid to El Salvador in 1982–83 was the object of extensive criticism in the press and in Congress, while \$210 million to Lebanon was virtually uncontested. Sending fifty-five trainers to El Salvador provoked extreme controversy, while a force twenty times as large in Lebanon raised almost no debate. A picture of the first marine killed in El Salvador was featured on the cover of *Newsweek*;²⁶ the earlier death of a marine in Lebanon received far less attention. One country has been a focus of political controversy, the other merely a tragedy. As the contrast between El Salvador and Lebanon shows, there is a unique public willingness to accept direct U.S. military involvement on the ground in the Middle East. Popular backing for the Carter Doctrine (which called the Persian Gulf critical to U.S. interests) and for the forces to back it up (the Central Command) demonstrated this fact even more dramatically. The absence of polarization along right/left lines in Lebanon and other parts of the Arab world allows the President unusually great flexibility to deploy American troops.

There is also unparalleled support for American financial involvement in the Middle East. The Council on Foreign Relations membership survey previously cited indicates that no less than 31 percent of the respondents viewed the Middle East an area of top priority for U.S. national interests, "justifying larger financial outlays and the involvement of U.S. combat forces if necessary."²⁷ When it is recalled that at the time of this survey nearly three-quarters of all U.S. foreign assistance was already going to the Middle East, this willingness to give aid is nothing less than astonishing. Related to this, the Egyptian–Israeli accords of 1979 may have been the first peace treaty in history for which a third party footed most of the bill. Preoccupation with the Middle East translates into an uncommon readiness to spend money there.

The Middle East is as anomalous in international relations as in U.S. domestic politics; the ideological chaos on the domestic scene has an inter-

26. *Newsweek*, June 6, 1983.

27. Bushner, *United States Policy*, p. 1.

national counterpart. The Nazis found an ally in the Mufti al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the Zionists' worst enemy in the Middle East, and the Soviet Union armed the nascent Israeli state. Today Israel has close relations with the Nationalist Party in South Africa but almost no official contact with any communist government except Romania. Spain under the Fascists had no relations with Israel but under the socialists is building them; in contrast, Greece had good relations with Israel until the socialists came to power in 1981.

As these examples suggest, outside the U.S. too, having similar ideological views implies nothing about the Middle East. This presents special challenges to the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), who are allied against the Soviet bloc but are unable to achieve a consensus on the Middle East. In October 1973, every NATO member, with the lone exception of Portugal, refused the U.S. landing rights to transport materiel to Israel. A Common Market declaration on the Middle East issued at Venice in June 1980, calling for Israel to negotiate with the P.L.O., clashed head-on with U.S. government policy. The first veto ever cast at the United Nations Security Council by the U.S. against an ally concerned the Middle East—a French draft resolution submitted in June 1982 calling for the simultaneous withdrawal of Israeli and P.L.O. forces from Beirut.

Conversely, Middle East issues hold out the possibility of U.S. cooperation with the Soviet Union. The first agreement ever reached between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. at the United Nations occurred in 1947 and involved the Arab–Zionist dispute.²⁸ More recently, in March 1984, U.S. diplomats were relieved when the Soviet Union vetoed a U.S.-backed proposal to send U.N. troops to Lebanon—something that could only happen concerning the Middle East.²⁹

Sensing the non-ideological nature of U.S. policy towards the Middle East, Soviet officials have long insisted that the region's problems can be solved only through cooperation between the superpowers. This argument would be dismissed out of hand for any other region, but for the Middle East it has had some success. American leaders have responded by repeatedly inviting Soviet participation in attempts to solve the region's problems. In 1969,

28. David Horowitz, *State in the Making*, trans. Julian Meltzer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 292.

29. *The New York Times*, March 2, 1984.

Secretary of State William Rogers called for the convening of two-power talks on the Middle East; in 1977, President Carter urged the resurrection of the Geneva Conference which the U.S.S.R. would co-chair with the U.S.; and in May 1983, Secretary Shultz appealed to the Soviet leaders to "urge the Syrians to withdraw" from Lebanon, in order to put the Lebanese-Israeli accords into effect. His appeal to "the Soviet Union to take another look and get on the side of peace in Lebanon"³⁰ was hardly what one would expect from a hard-line anti-Communist administration. These actions stand in direct contrast to discussions over Namibia and El Salvador, where U.S. efforts are primarily aimed at excluding the Soviets. Thus, the Middle East appears to offer a unique opportunity for U.S.-Soviet cooperation.

Breaking all the rules holds out both dangers and opportunities for the debate over U.S. foreign policy. There are problems connected with the fact that partisan concerns so dominate discussion about the Middle East. Nationalist claims, business profits, and religious passions have too much influence on American actions in the region, ensuring that the Middle East policy of the United States is only marginally connected to the country's global concerns. Tempting as it is to inquire in a logical manner how the Arab-Israeli conflict fits within U.S. policy goals, this is condemned to remain a purely speculative pursuit. Partisan factors are here to stay.

There are also advantages to be gained from the absence of ideology; the Middle East offers a unique chance to escape the conservative/liberal dichotomy that otherwise dominates American foreign policy. It adds an element of diversity to American political life and contributes to the vitality of the foreign policy debate. Whereas other regions are seen in terms of danger, the Middle East gives American politicians a chance to achieve something positive. Nearly every recent administration has attempted to make its mark in the Middle East, for this is the forum where U.S. diplomacy has the best chances of success.

30. *Ibid.*, May 11, 1983.