The Christian Stance On the Arab-Israeli Conflict

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Periodically eruptions of violence along the Suez Canal remind the American people that there are other areas of strife that threaten the peace of the world than Vietnam. In recent days the news on the Middle East has been stealing the headlines from Southeast Asia. Furthermore, sober statements by high diplomatic officials warn that the tensions in this section of the globe are a far greater threat to world peace than the Vietnam war.

Weary of war, seeking disengagement, the American has little stomach for becoming actively involved in another military struggle. Furthermore, the news from the Eastern Mediterranean is such a carbon copy of accounts emanating from that area over the past twenty-five years that it is tempting to shrug it off in the hope that the unstable Middle East will somehow regain its equilibrium once more. However, students of this section of world affairs have pointed out that none of the basic issues have been resolved by the two Suez wars of 1956 and 1967, and that Arab-Israeli friction remains as potentially explosive as it was in 1948 and again in 1956 and 1967.

It may be well then to re-examine the current scene and to ask anew what our United States government and, more personally, the concerned Christian citizen in this country can do to help in resolving this extended and bitter conflict between Arab and Israeli.

In the limited space of this article, the writer will seek to analyze a few of the many current dilemmas of the governments of three major antagonists—Egypt, Jordan and Israel—before addressing himself to the American Christian’s response.

EGYPT

Egypt has long been regarded as the leader of the Arab countries vis-a-vis Israel. The Revolutionary Council under Nasser moved to take this position of leadership in 1955, a number of years after the partition of Palestine, both as a means of bolstering the government’s internal position with the Egyptian populace and under the glow of leading the newly independent Arab states toward the vision of a great united Arab nation.

This role of leadership in the struggle for restoring the rights and property of the Palestinian Arabs had both good and unpleasant effects. In the 1954-56
period it did help to unite the people of Egypt under their leaders. For a time it even served to hasten the flow of foreign aid to Egypt, as the rivals in the cold war—Russia and the U.S.A.—competed to woo this nation that was exercising more and more influence in this strategic crossroads of the East and West. However, on a number of occasions in the past twelve years President Nasser and his aides must have rued their decision to be the vanguard in the struggle for Palestine, for it has led to two disastrous military defeats, contributed to the fiasco of the military venture in Yemen, and brought to the Egyptian people distressing economic travail, and almost economic bankruptcy.

The Nasser government has come to recognize too that it has had a tiger by the tail. The more the Egyptian government has supported the elements that have clamored for military vengeance on Israel, the more difficult it has become to restrain these elements. Instead of leading, it has in recent years been forced reluctantly, against its better judgment to take steps that were both economically and militarily unsound. And in the aftermath, it has had to face the growing dissatisfaction of the people with a government that has “led them” to military defeat and economic hardship.

There is plenty of evidence that President Nasser today is not nearly as secure in his position and not nearly as broadly supported by the populace—especially the more articulate sections of it—as he was two or three years ago, or even six months ago. This portends no good. For the elements most actively opposing him are chiefly those who would urge a more intransigent, bellicose, and fundamentally irrational position on the Israeli question.

There are many hints, beneath the bluster of harsh threats, that the Nasser government recognizes the fatality of pursuing a highly aggressive policy toward Israel and the imperative of coming to the negotiation table with its neighbor. What is questionable is whether the present government has the strength and the support to take this bold step. The Egyptian people by and large are not—as they have not been for centuries—militant people. Most of them long for a reversal to the present trend, and many are ready to swallow their pride and accept some compromise if the price is not too great. But the military establishment has become increasingly restive, and the efforts to root out the dissidents in the army have led to more underground plotting. Punishing officers for negligence that contributed to the June 1967 military debacle may divert the chagrin of the citizenry, but it also causes fear and suspicion and counterplotting within the military system. The economic pinch, felt before the 1967 war, is even greater now. The broad base of public support that Nasser could once count on is not as firm as it was.

Furthermore, Egypt has so committed herself to other Arab countries, in her role of leader of the Arab bloc, that she cannot disregard their feelings with impunity. In fact, the government is more vulnerable today than at almost any point in the last decade to the pressures of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the
Syrian regime, and the U.S.S.R. The less secure the government is in its position, the more concessions it must make to dissident elements in order to maintain its control—or else the more repressive it must become in enforcing its position.

Western reaction to President Nasser himself has run the full gamut during the period of his presidency. The proper question to ask today is not whether Nasser is trustworthy or pro-Western. The most important question is whether the toppling of Nasser and his government at this time would contribute to or hinder the resolution of the problems of the Middle East. To this writer, the evidence points strongly to the latter. Many of the highly educated, professional Egyptians are depressed and unhappy by the continued brinksmanship of the government and the economic malaise. But there is little evidence that this group is in the ascendancy. Rather, the Spanish Embassy, which is handling U.S. interests in Egypt during this period of diplomatic non-recognition between the USA and the UAR, reports that the requests of educated Egyptians for immigration visas to countries of Europe, and North and South America are rapidly increasing. If the present government is overthrown, it seems far more likely to be at the hands of the more chauvinistic militant elements.

JORDAN

The survival of King Hussein as head of the government of Jordan during the past twelve years is one of the minor miracles of the contemporary political world.

His is a kingdom of two peoples, about equal in number—the Bedouins of the Eastern and Southern portion and the Palestinians. Palestinians living in Jordan have all the rights of citizenship in that country. (This is more than can be said for their status in other Arab states.) Yet almost invariably these people consider themselves not Jordanians but Palestinians. Still dreaming of an independent nation of their own, they are now restless citizens of a country that, as they see it, should have one overriding aim—the restoration of their homeland to its rightful owners. Thus Hussein seeks to promote the welfare of a country, about half of whose citizens consider themselves more dedicated to the territorially non-existent state called Palestine than to the present political state in which they live. Ironically the financial aid that has enabled Jordan to keep afloat and even develop its meager natural resources ever since it became a nation has come from Great Britain and the U.S.A., the two countries which more than any other fostered the creation of Israel and continue to be its strongest supporters. Thus, Hussein is caught between Scylla and Charybdis, facing the pressures of his Western allies and financiers to recognize and come to peaceful terms with Israel, and the pressures of the Palestinian segment of his nation to lead the battle to defeat Israel and restore Palestine. His career has been a feat of balancing between these two forces.

Recently, that is, in the last half decade, this task has been made more difficult by the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The title is descriptive of both the aim and the membership of this group. The Palestinians who belong
to this organization—and they are scattered all over the world—have this to say about the motives leading to its establishment. Over the past ten years the United Nations has repeatedly passed resolutions supporting the rights of the Palestinian refugees. Nothing happened. Nothing will happen. We are convinced that other countries, even the other Arab countries who mouth the slogans of Arab unity, are so concerned about their own national self interests that they will not take meaningful action leading to restoration of our homeland. If the task is to be accomplished we must do it ourselves, or at least take the lead.

Part of the efforts of the organization have been devoted to telling the world the Palestinian story as the P.L.O. sees it and enlisting sympathy and moral support. But the organization is more than an organ of propaganda. The action wing has pressed for developing a military arm whose sole end is liberation of Palestine. The P.L.O. has not been particularly effective in its efforts. In the early stages its significance was discounted by pro-Western Arabs. It has had, however, real import. It has contributed to the open militancy of those in every Arab country who protest against the tortuous and seemingly fruitless diplomatic efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. The P.L.O. push for an independent army, supported by all Arab states, is especially dangerous for the stability of Jordan. Over half of all people who call themselves Palestinians live in this country. The formation and drilling of such an army and the mounting of a liberation war by that army would almost necessarily take place in Jordan. Such an organization then, with its own "army," dedicated to one goal, feeling in its bitterness and frustration that it has nothing to lose, poses a sore dilemma for the established government of Jordan. To disavow the general Arab position against Israel would be suicidal for Hussein and his government. Yet to permit a nation within a nation—and this is what the P.L.O. potentially is—to act unilaterally, would also threaten Jordanian existence. Whether because, as a military realist, he is convinced that the Arab countries cannot now or in the near future defeat Israel on the battlefield, or because he believes that the resolution of the Arab-Israeli tensions must and can be resolved only by patient, peaceful methods, or because he recognizes that in the event of another military confrontation, regardless of the outcome, his government and possibly Jordan as a nation would disintegrate—and all of these probably entered his consideration—Hussein has tried over recent years to steer a more moderate, restrained course in the Arab-Israeli dispute, in the face of great internal and external pressures, the latter chiefly from Syria and Egypt.

The signs in recent days point to new heights of tension within Jordan. The street fighting that flared up in Amman signals once more the struggle to shift the course of Jordanian policy to a more intransigent position vis-a-vis Israel. It is a reminder that whenever a Middle Eastern leader seems to be taking a direction of compromise on this issue, he must risk almost certain sharp reaction by segments of his own people. Mr. Jarring's continued efforts on behalf of the U.N. have led to spates of rumors. Among the most prominent recently is that of possible agreement on arrangements for peace talks. These rumors undoubtedly have helped
create the current Jordanian crisis. Even though Hussein seems now to have the upper hand, the necessity to use troops in order to quell unrest among his own people, regardless of the cause, is an indication of the limitation of the government to take bold new directions in resolving the tensions with Israel.

**ISRAEL**

Similarly Israel’s position today is not an enviable one. Like her Arab neighbors she is caught in a trap partly of her own making, and no move that she makes is without bad consequences. She faces the Herculean task of getting the rest of the world, and especially her Arab neighbors, to forget a phase of history—the actions of the past that brought into being the state of Israel—and to accept the reality of the present geo-political situation as the base from which to proceed with peace negotiations.

The irony of the history of Israel is that it is the account of a group of people persecuted over the centuries who, in their desperate longing for security and peace, have on three occasions in the last twenty-five years felt impelled to initiate military campaigns to gain, hopefully, a measure of security and peace. It is little wonder, then, that the Arab states, her defeated military antagonists on all three occasions, find it difficult to believe her statements of peaceful intentions and are reluctant to come directly to the peace table with her, especially since they feel they have a much better chance under the aegis of the U.N. It is little wonder, too, that Israel is skeptical of turning to the United Nations for resolution of the Arab-Israeli disputes. To do this is to face almost certain reopening of the “justice” of the founding of the state of Israel by numerous members of that body.

The whole Israeli case for the June 1967 war rests on the principle of self-defense. Her rationale to the court of world opinion is that her action was preventive—to ward off the threat of large scale aggressive actions by the Arab states and to eliminate the persistent guerilla actions of Arab extremists operating from these neighboring Arab states. There is real evidence to support this contention. However, this position holds only when it is agreed that the book of the past is open only from 1950 onward. The Arab countries have refused to do so. The actions of the past two decades they insist are all part of the resistance to the initial “aggression” of the Israelis that led to the establishment of the state of Israel. How can this action be considered a closed book when over one million living sufferers—the Arab refugees and their children—remain as a bitter testimony. In other words, the key to their argument is the right of Israel to exist.

There is more, too, behind the mood of the people of the Arab countries. In the twentieth century, with its movement toward world order, the concept of universal human rights has been advanced, and has been eagerly seized upon by people in underdeveloped countries, many of whom lived long under foreign domination. The principle of self-determination is especially dear to them. At the very time that the people in the Middle East were hopeful of assuming control of their own affairs, the state of Israel, they claim, was created in the heart of
"Arab country," much against their will, with the strong support of the Western powers. One of them, Great Britain, had been the chief foreign overlord in the Middle East during the past half century. The creation of Israel in the Arab eyes was, and remains, an insult to the Arab people, a blow to their self esteem, a final act of "imperialism." On this they brood; nor has it helped that the road to effective self-rule and development of better standards of living in the newly independent Arab states has been rocky, especially in those countries without the bonanza of oil. The rapid development of the Israeli economy, aided especially in the early years by massive financial grants and loans from the western powers, has added to the resentment of the Arab people. All of these arguments and feelings, even though they may be countered and their validity disputed, actually exist.

So Israel, truly desirous of establishing firm boundaries and stable, peaceful relations with her Arab neighbors, has faced since her independence day, and still faces; these strong antagonisms. What is the way out? Here, as in Jordan and as in Egypt, there is divergence of opinion among the people in and out of government. The more hawkish group feels that force and only force can bring about peace. This is the only language that the Arabs will understand. The more dovish group, recognizing the inability of Israel to conquer the vast land and subdue the population of the opposing Arab countries, and perhaps more concerned about their own responsibility in bringing about the conflict, advocate more forbearance and conciliation. Chaim Weizmann, first president of the State of Israel, once wrote, "I am certain that the world will judge the Jewish State by what it will do to the Arabs." On the issue of self-preservation, the maintenance of the State of Israel, the Israeli people are fully united. But how to bring the Arab people and the Arab countries to accept this as fact is a source of great frustration. Since the June war of last year the question has taken on additional urgency because additional hundreds of thousands of Arabs have been brought under their territorial control. Thus not only security against an external foe but against potential resistance within the country is a matter of concern. In the face of the unyielding position publicly taken by Arab leaders in other countries and continuing incidents of sabotage, will forbearance work? Will retaliation in strength work? Will the recent raid deep into the heartland of Egypt sober the opposition or make it more determined? The task of the Israeli government is truly formidable.

What stand shall the Christian in the United States take on these complex issues? What shall he communicate to his congressman? What concrete steps can he take directly? Specific answers are not easy to provide. I have spent some time in pointing out the limited range of freedom of action that each of the central actors in the Middle Eastern tragedy has. All are caught in the web of history to which their own selfish or foolish moves have contributed, to which the selfish or foolish moves of governments and peoples outside the area—including the U.S.—have contributed, to which the facts of geography, population pressures, and the long trend of national temperament shaped over the centuries have contributed. There is no easy way out of the morass.
We here in America tend to look at the Middle East crisis with some detachment. We are not caught up in it the same way we are in the Vietnam war. Consequently, one of the tendencies that many Americans show is to seek to make Olympian judgments on the conflict, decide once and for all which is the chief culprit, side with the other and push for punishment of the villain and for justice for the victim. This satisfies the moral sense. This seems to be the Christian response. The only problem is that the more one studies, the more one sees the countless moral ambiguities that enter. This is no simple black-white issue.

It has been my experience that most Americans traveling into a Middle Eastern country and staying long enough to know some of the people there find themselves becoming partisan to that country in its stand on the Arab-Israeli question. Both sides argue their position on moral grounds. Both sides protest the basic inhumanity and injustice of the other, and both can present moving evidence. However, the longer one gets to know the people and the problem, the more irritated he becomes with the inflexibility and emotionalism of his friends as they face the real question—what is the way out?—and the more clearly he sees that insisting on strict justice by the opposition while condoning acts of violence on one’s own side because of the provocation of the enemy is not the answer.

Many Americans, studying the tangled skein of recent Middle Eastern history and tracing the fallibility and vindictiveness that have marked actions on both sides (cannot the same be said about every page of human history?), have been tempted to use Mercutio’s words, “A plague on both your houses,” and retreat from the scene. “Let them fight it out. Thank heavens this is not my concern.” This is an understandable reaction; however, the concluding thought is not realistic—or Christian. Just as a local strike in a key industry of modern America can and does affect the whole economy of the country, so serious disruption of the flow of oil in the area of the greatest concentration of oil resources in the world can and does affect the economy and stability of many countries. Add to this the significance (still great but not as crucial as it once was) of the Suez Canal for international commerce, and the strategic role of the East Mediterranean in the Cold War struggle that has become warmer again since the Czechoslovakia affair, and it becomes apparent that the Middle Eastern tinder box cannot help but be of practical concern to the citizen of the United States.

It should also be of concern to the Christian citizen of this country. In spite of their frequent attacks on U.S. “imperialism,” chiefly because of our support of Israel, the Arab people by and large still do recognize that the U.S.—both its government and its people—is not unfriendly to them and their legitimate aspirations. And in spite of their chagrin at the leading role the government of the United States played in censuring them for their attack on Egypt in 1956, the Israeli people by and large recognize even more certainly that the people and the government of the United States are not unfriendly to them. Here lies the cue for the concerned Christian citizen of the United States. The proper role is not one of blind partisanship, or of castigation, or of withdrawal. It is to continue to em-
phasize friendly interest and support, including financial, of the efforts of both sides to develop their own country and to provide a decent living for their citizens. It is to urge frankly and forcefully that each take initiative in seeking reconciliation. This is not easy. It means at times expressing our dismay and indignation at continuing acts of violence—on both sides. It means appealing to each to take the leadership in breaking out of the vicious circle of name-calling and retaliation and in acting with patience and forbearance in the face of such actions. The reduction of hostility is a painfully slow process. It is however, the only process.

This kind of action is open to misunderstanding, especially by the violent partisans on either side. It can lead to accusations from either extreme that the person or the government is anti "us" and pro "them." Almost invariably economic assistance to an Arab country has been looked upon by Israeli partisans as an unfriendly act toward Israel, and vice versa. Yet what is needed is a helping hand. Actually the Middle East tensions have little chance of dying down unless the great powers work positively toward this end.

The open sore that needs balm is the Arab refugee problem. It is true that if the Arab refugee problem were to vanish overnight, the Arab-Israeli conflict would not be automatically resolved. However, it is equally true that the tensions of the Middle East cannot be lowered until big steps are taken to help the refugees find a better place in the sun. To this task the concerned Christian can direct his energies, regardless of his judgments as to who was basically responsible for their present plight. This is a task for the United Nations, for the government of this country, for the Christian Church, for the individual in this country.