THE UNITED STATES AND THE PALESTINE REFUGEES

by

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PREFACE

The problem of Palestine, simply stated, is the clash of two peoples—the Palestinians and the Israelis—over the same territory. The Palestinians base their claim on continuous occupation of historic Palestine for approximately thirteen hundred years. They regard the Israeli capture of these lands in 1948 and in 1967 as unlawful seizure. The Israelis assert an historical-religious tie to the Holy Land and refuse to relinquish possession of any part until a final peace settlement. The Palestine problem is at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict and is the prime source of the instability which spreads over the Middle East. Such instability has given the Soviet Union access to Arab capitals, because it has successfully established itself as a champion of Arab causes, particularly the quest to regain the territories lost to Israel. It has also driven a wedge between the United States and the Arabs by claiming that this country is committed to the full support and defense of Israel against the Arabs. As a result, the United States has lost an enormous amount of prestige in the Arab world and in some quarters is considered an enemy second only to Israel.

The conflict over the territory of Palestine has not been settled by conquest. The Israeli victories have not brought peace but greater strife; for nothing has been done to solve the human problems created in the aftermath of war—the displacement of people, their demand for justice, the plight of the refugees who depend on international charity, the unfulfilled commitments to the refugees by the
world community, the question of self-determination, and the force of irredentism among the Palestinians. Any attempt to solve the Palestine question must include these issues, for if the grievances of the Palestinians remain unaddressed, no peace is possible.

Central to the human aspect of the problem is the matter of repatriation or resettlement of the refugees, with compensation. Serious objections arise in either case. Repatriation cannot be instituted unless Israel consents to it, which she is not likely to do for any number large enough to satisfy the Palestinians. Resettlement with compensation works a hardship on the Arab states which must absorb the refugees, for they have great difficulty fulfilling the needs of their own citizens even now. Furthermore, resettlement would nullify Palestinian claims to their homeland and negate the Arab case against Israel; no Arab politician or leader could afford publicly to support such a move. Neither repatriation nor resettlement satisfies the principals in the conflict; thus far no other means has been found to alter the situation in Palestine and offset the potential for war.

The human aspects of the problem are the most difficult because they are the least reconcilable. They are also the most important because they have a direct bearing on all other aspects of the conflict, such as the matter of boundaries, transit rights, and the recognition of Israel. A piecemeal approach to settlement which avoids the human problem has little chance of succeeding and the record of failure in this respect is very clear.

Among American objectives in the Middle East, stability and the containment of Soviet expansion in the region are primary considerations. But these are too broad and general to provide guidance
for a detailed foreign policy in the area. The result has been that American policies sometimes work at cross purposes or that they lack consistency and long-term planning. The Palestine issue is a good example. One of the major flaws in the American approach has been the lack of definition and direction. It is not easy to determine what, if anything, this country intends to do about the refugee problem. There is no uniformity of attitude among political officials; nor has there been a consistent course of action. Uniformity and consistency are not always necessary or appropriate; but the less predictable the approach, the greater the likelihood of confusion and misunderstanding, particularly among the refugees. In such cases they tend to assume the worst—that the United States has written them off.

In the matter of uniformity, there is not always a correspondence of views among political officials. The contrast is most marked in the attitudes of certain members of Congress whose constituents are deeply committed to the survival and development of a Jewish state in Israel. On the one hand and the State Department, which must consider the survival and development of Israel along with America’s relations with the Arab states and its interests in the region in general. Administrations have varied in their concern with the refugee problem, as well, some more attentive than others. As for inconsistency, the rather passive attitude toward Palestinian aspirations to return after the war in 1948 is quite different from the very active support given the European displaced persons who sought refuge in Palestine from Nazi Germany. The American concern over Israeli objections to repatriating Palestinians was unlike the earlier indifference to Arab protests over increasing Jewish settlement in the Holy Land before 1948. There is also an
inconsistency in American words and actions with respect to the
Palestinians. On the one hand, the United States supports the annual
General Assembly resolution calling for repatriation or resettlement
of the refugees and contributes well over half the sums needed by UNRWA
for their health, welfare, and training. On the other hand, this country
hesitates to take any measures to implement the resolution in a manner
satisfactory to the Palestinians. Generally the United States has urged
that they be resettled with compensation, although the refugees have made
it clear the choice must be up to them. This country has in a sense
dehumanized the problem by seeking economic solutions and overlooking
the feelings and aspirations of the refugees who consider repatriation
the central issue.

Because of the importance of the refugee issue in the Arab-
Israeli conflict, American policy in the Arab world will be judged largely
in terms of the treatment of the Palestinians. This will have a signifi-
cant bearing on whether America regains any of its standing and influence
among the Arabs or whether it continues to lose ground to the Soviet
Union. Unfortunately, the refugee issue is often submerged in other, more
immediate problems, such as cease-fires and other attempts to bring the
Arab states and Israel to the conference table. It is not of concern to
the American public in general. The effect is that the United States
Government has not given this issue the attention it deserves. Political
officials in the executive and legislative branches have been able to
ignore it or to use it as a means of fortifying their positions with
voters largely sympathetic to Israel by suggesting that there be a
termination of refugee aid and an effort to resettle these permanently
in Arab lands.
The purpose of this study is to ascertain the attitude of American political officials toward the Palestinians and toward their claim to a national territory and a national existence. It will analyze the dynamics of this political issue in American decision-making circles, including the motivations of policy makers, their perceptions of national interests, and the interplay of governmental bodies and individuals having a role in policy formulation. It will illustrate the way in which a powerful nation thinks and acts toward a foreign community with whom there are few strong ties of sentiment and culture and upon whom this country has looked with general detachment and aloofness. This will help define American policy on this important aspect of United States' involvement in the Middle East, so that it can be measured against the stated objectives of stability and the containment of Soviet expansion. This should provide some indication of whether the approaches being pursued are likely to lead to these objectives.

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