

and Israel are to be drawn into a practical and effective process of negotiation, a wider more comprehensive framework of negotiation will obviously be required.

In theory the obvious core of such a framework would be the Security Council of the United Nations. Indeed this kind of task, the peaceful solution of a dispute which is also a threat to international peace, was precisely what the Security Council was set up to do. Unfortunately the Council's credit is sadly depleted. East-West rivalry and distrust have deprived it of that unanimity of its permanent members which was to have been its main driving force and authority.

In recent years the Council has tended to be divided seriously in most matters related to the Palestine problem. On the other hand its recent unanimity on a resolution designed to bring an end to the Iran-Iraq War may indicate a new dawn of perception among the permanent members that there are some international conflicts which are simply too dangerous for them *not* to cooperate on. The Arab-Israeli problem certainly qualifies for this category. In fact the Security Council embodies most of the prerequisites for a framework to deal with the Arab-Israel question. It has a well-defined mandate, and broad geographical representation. It has recognised rules of procedure and ways of conducting business. It is – or can be – a relatively flexible body – able to set up sub-organs to do particular jobs. It has a permanent staff and high level executive officer, the Secretary General.

For all its frustrations, the Security Council has sometimes managed, in times of crisis, to reach a vital consensus. It has shown a capacity to improvise and innovate – in mediation, conciliation efforts, good offices, fact-finding, observation and peacekeeping. Its permanent members, and those closely associated with them, are protected from runaway majorities by the veto, or unanimity rule. Thus Israel would be protected, as it often has been in the past, by the US veto and, Syria and perhaps others as well by the Soviet veto.

For all its shortcomings and checkered history it is not to be

dismissed as a serious crisis-management mechanism. In fact there is nothing else like it. It is the more regrettable that in the Western world the Security Council has become unfashionable as a vehicle for seeking a Middle East solution, for it has more of the essential prerequisites than any other mechanism.

WHAT ARE THOSE PREREQUISITES?

First, there is the balanced representation of the main powers without whose active and constructive involvement it is unlikely that a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli problem can be evolved. This particularly applies to the US and the USSR. Although in recent years there has been an insistence, in the United States and in some quarters in Israel, that the Soviet Union be excluded from serious dealings about the Middle East problem, its exclusion is not only unrealistic but goes against the lessons of historical experience. When the Soviet Union *has* been actively involved, in 1948 during the establishment of the State of Israel, or in 1967 for Resolution 242, or in 1973 after the October War when the USSR and the US were co-chairmen of the Middle East Peace Conference, the best basis for some constructive work on a settlement existed. Refusal to take account of Soviet views or the legitimate interests of the Soviet Union in the Middle East and as a permanent member of the Security Council, as for example, in the period during and after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, have tended to have at best negative, and at worst disastrous, consequences.

All the parties to the Arab-Israeli problem must be represented in a form which is acceptable to them. The problem here, of course, is Palestinian representation and, specifically, the participation of the PLO. It was this which eventually aborted the initially promising 1973 Middle East Peace Conference, and goes to the heart of the negotiating dilemma. In recent years more energy has been expended on this question than on any other part of the Palestine dilemma but a solution remains elusive.

The problem resides not only in the PLO's stated aim to establish in Palestine a secular state for Muslims, Christians and Jews and in the factions of the PLO which stress armed struggle, which some maintain is the PLO's only means of being taken seriously at all. An equally important difficulty is that the recognition of Israel's right to exist – regarded in Israel and in the West as a pre-requisite for the PLO's participation – is also the main negotiating card available to the PLO. Thus, the argument goes, it would be foolish for the PLO to play this card *before* negotiations start. On the other hand the PLO will not be admitted to the negotiating table before it plays it.

It will take an extraordinary degree of consensus, persuasion and cooperative effort in the outside world to break this vicious circle. Here again the Security Council might provide the essential framework. The Council is, incidentally, the only forum in the world where Israel and the PLO from time to time sit at the same table.

The negotiating framework must take account of both the Arab states' determination to negotiate the problem as a whole and Israel's insistence on separate negotiations with the states involved. The United Nations, an organization of independent sovereign states, is especially designed to be acutely sensitive to the preeminence of national sovereignty. Indeed, this is one of the grounds on which it is most often criticized in public debate. Any fear that the Council could engage in undesirable coercion on the Arab-Israeli problem is belied by its entire historical record. On the other hand, the Security Council has a great potential capacity for persuasion, conciliation and face-saving. It has provided an acceptable pretext for cease fires, withdrawals and changes of policy on numerous occasions in the past, not only in the Middle East, but on the Indian subcontinent, Africa and elsewhere. If the Council approaches problems in a spirit of unanimity it can help conflicting parties to be reasonable without appearing to be weak.

BECAUSE THE STAKES ON THE table in the Middle East negotiations are so high – security and survival for the states involved – there should be international assurance behind any arrangements that may be agreed. Collective guarantees of security were one of the main objectives of the Charter system. In the Middle East, bilateral guarantees, even if powerful governments were prepared to give them, would be far less satisfactory and could even pose a hazard to international peace.

It would certainly be an extraordinary step for the five permanent members to guarantee a Middle East settlement, but is such a development totally inconceivable? A Middle East negotiation framework *outside* the UN, will have to overcome most of the same difficulties that arise *inside* the UN. It would be easier to try to use the UN Security Council as it was originally intended to be used. Is it idle to ask whether, on an international question of such importance, the great powers might, after forty years, be prepared to consider such a revolutionary step? □

Further Reading

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Eduardo Jimenez de Arechaga. *Voting and the Handling of Disputes in the Security Council*, New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1978.

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