

BY BRIAN URQUHART

# THE UN'S ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*The Arab-Israeli dispute is a standing threat to international peace and security. Existing United Nations machinery, created over forty years ago, should be used in the search for a solution.*

IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1987 IS A year of poignant anniversaries. It is the 90th anniversary of Theodor Herzl's first Zionist Congress, the 70th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, the 50th anniversary of the Peel Report suggesting separate Arab and Jewish States in Palestine, the 40th anniversary of the UN partition plan, the 20th anniversary of the Six Day War and Resolution 242, the 10th anniversary of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, and the 5th anniversary of Israel's invasion of Lebanon.

This list give a mere glimpse of the tangled skein of history which constitutes the Arab-Israeli or, as it used to be called, the Palestine problem. So far, none of the many efforts, violent or peaceful, to disentangle this skein have been effective, and a mood of resignation, fatigue, or even of fatalism, seems prevalent, while strong partisanship in the outside world – always the bane of efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli problem – persists.

Once again there is talk of a Middle East peace conference. It seems to be assumed, in the West at any rate, that this conference will take place outside the UN framework, although it may include the permanent members of the Security Council. There have been many recent exchanges on this subject – two years ago between Jordan and the PLO, more recently between Israel and the US, and, apparently, clandestinely between Israel and Jordan. The majority of the members of the UN are in favour of a Middle East peace conference *within* the UN framework, but this is of little relevance if Israel and the US are determined that it should be *outside* the UN framework. The conference is also a controversial question in Israel itself, Prime Minister Shamir opposing it, while Foreign Minister Peres supports it. This fact alone renders the idea, at least for the time being, moot.

A new Middle East conference is an uncertain and controversial

proposition. Even if the preliminary organizational and procedural questions were resolved and the conference convened, the subject matter remains as disputed and intractable as ever. The purpose of this article is to suggest a more modest and unfashionable course: to use existing UN machinery, as it was originally intended, to solve the Arab-Israeli problem.

THE ESSENCE OF THE PALESTINE problem is relatively simple; its implications immensely complex. Historical fate has made the Palestinians and the Israelis compete for the same, small, precious homeland. Their struggle is dramatized and made more tragic by the disasters which have befallen both peoples. It is possible to make a powerful argument for the claims and aspirations of both, and both believe passionately in the justice of their cause. Since neither can avoid the other, and neither will abandon their aspirations or go away, they must eventually learn to live together in peace. That is, and must be, the main objective of the peace process.

The deep historical roots and high emotional content of the Arab-Israeli conflict are not the only reasons for the obligation of the international community to help in its solution. The UN has

been intimately involved in this matter since 1947, when it voted the partition plan. Throughout the history of the problem the world community has given undertakings to both sides – obligations which, on the Palestinian side in particular, have never been fulfilled. In addition, this is a conflict where a few mistakes, miscalculations or misunderstandings can very easily and rapidly lead to a confrontation of the nuclear superpowers.

Nor can Israel or the Arabs afford to abandon the negotiation process. The problem will not solve itself. With its present occupied territories, Israel is faced with a demographic time bomb which every year becomes more threatening and also constitutes an intolerable situation for the Palestinian inhabitants.

The issues involved are well known. Broadly speaking they involve Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories; the evolution of a permanent peace which includes the recognition of the right of Israel, as well as the other states of the region, to live in peace within recognized borders; the practical recognition of the legitimate rights and aspirations of the Palestinians; and the future of Jerusalem.

No lasting solution to these complex and interlocking problems can be totally satisfactory to

any of the parties concerned. Compromise, concessions and some degree of mutual understanding and tolerance will be necessary if progress is to be made. Unfortunately these elements are notably lacking on the Middle East scene. Instead, rigid positions, frustration and strong rhetoric breed extremism and violence on all sides, while the forces of moderation are steadily undermined. This tendency is particularly notable when no negotiating process is being attempted.

For this reason, if for no other, it is vital to maintain the effort to negotiate a solution. It has long been evident that the parties directly concerned will not be able to make progress towards a negotiated solution without outside help and pressure. Negotiating skill is not enough, as the experiences of Gunnar Jarring, the UN representative under Resolution 242, among many others, have indicated. What is required is a benevolent framework of pressure, assurance and encouragement which can offer tangible benefits for concessions and compromises. The 1973 Middle East Peace Conference, short though its only formal session was, is a good example of such a framework – presided over, incidentally by the United States and the Soviet Union. At that time, superpower sponsorship of the conference and the unanimous support of the world community, made it easier for the conflicting parties to negotiate a cease fire and disengagement agreement without loss of face, and to agree to UN peacekeeping and conflict-control mechanisms. The Camp David negotiations between Egypt and Israel, presided over by the United States, were another example on a more limited scale.

A FRAMEWORK IS NOW DESPERATELY required to encompass the remaining elements of the problem – the other occupied territories, and the future of the Palestinians and of Jerusalem. If Syria, Jordan, the Palestinian leadership, Lebanon