

II SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

The Middle East situated at the point of confluence of three continents—Europe, Asia and Africa—has long had strategic significance. The Suez Canal offered a short-cut between Britain and its Far East dominions and represented the critical communications link at the height of the British Empire. More recently, Middle East oil, representing about 60 percent of the world's known oil reserves and about 23 percent of current non-Communist production, has given the area a strategic importance. That oil is, in varying degrees, the lifeblood of the industrialized economies and the foundation of their prosperity.

Yet throughout the past thirty years, it has been hard to find a more unstable or volatile region. Governments in the Arab states and in Iran (the one non-Arab Moslem state in the region) range from monarchies to radical military dictatorships. Many leaders have been subject to military coups or assassinations. While the Arab states can almost invariably all agree on pronouncements sharply critical of Israel, professions of Arab unity seem to lack substance. Ancient rivalries persist and new rivalries have emerged. Many of the Arab states have been at war, or on the verge of war, with one or more of their neighbours in recent decades.

Nor does Islam provide a religious and social cohesion among Arab countries. In fact, the contrary is true. Religious disagreements that divide Moslem countries and provoke internal disputes go back to the time of the Prophet Mohammed's death, when conflicting claims led to schisms such as the one between Sunni and Shia Islamic groups. These traditional divisions spawn current offshoots, of which the Islamic fundamentalist movement is currently causing the most social ferment.

The rivalries, new and old, the continuing battles, the oil wealth, and the strategic significance of the region have combined to make the Middle East one of the most highly militarized areas in the world. At this time there are not one but two, and perhaps three, arms races going on in the area. One is the Arab-Israeli arms race involving mainly Israel and Syria and to some degree Egypt and Jordan as well. The United States offers military equipment to some Arab states, principally Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia and is Israel's principal supplier of up-to-date sophisticated weapons on extremely advantageous terms. As for Syria, the scale of recent Soviet military support has been extensive, replacing with updated versions all tanks and planes lost in the 1982 war in Lebanon and furnishing the most sophisticated missile and electronic defence systems, not to mention some 7,000 Soviet advisors. In addition, neither Lebanon's warring factions nor the Palestinian guerrillas seem to lack weapons.

The second arms race is in the Persian Gulf area where Iraq and Iran are flaying each other with arms supplied by a variety of sources from both East and