

AFTER THE OCTOBER WAR, TOWARDS A PEACE TREATY?

Since the October War there has been some diplomatic movement, and indications more convincing than ever before, of a genuine desire for a settlement on the part of some Arab leaders, notably President Sadat. The next question is this: what is the purpose of these moves? Do they see them as a first step towards peace to be followed by others in the same direction- or do they see them as a first stage in the unravelling of the past- first to undo the war of 1967 and then, when circumstances permit, to undo the war of 1948-9. Clearly, much depends on the answer to this question.

There is no single or simple answer. The present phase is one of transition, in which many different attitudes can be detected among Arab leaders- attitudes which are subject to change in either direction. Israel cannot safely disregard explicit threats which the October War has shown to be more substantial than was thought. But, equally, Israel cannot afford to neglect any real opportunity to achieve peace. Such an opportunity now exists. This opportunity must be exploited- but at the same time the dangers attending it should be identified and, as far as possible, guarded against. I would suggest that the best safeguard, as between the Arab States and Israel, is a signed peace and normalization of relations. It may be objected that such a program is unrealistic and Utopian. It would be equally unrealistic and Utopian to expect Israel to withdraw to less defensible borders without at least some assurance that they will not have to defend them against annihilation. This, after all, is what the conflict has been about for a quarter of a century. If the threat of annihilation is real, it must be countered; if false, it must be exorcised. This would make it possible to meet Arab fears and desires concerning Israeli expansion and the settlement of the problem of the Palestinians.

The Arabs are often blamed for loose, wild utterances. We should, however, note the accuracy, consistency and indeed integrity of their refusal to make a real peace. In one sense this is discouraging, but it also gives some grounds for hope that once this point is overcome, the way will really be open and not subject to sudden changes and reversals.

One should not overstate the significance of diplomatic peace-making, but it seems to me that formal peace negotiations between the parties and a formal treaty of peace would mean the crossing of a vital psychological barrier in the Arab world- and such crossings are not easily reversed. In the second place, it would set up what the record of events in the world since 1945 has shown to be a real obstacle to armed conflict- namely, a normal, demarcated, recognized, functioning, international frontier defended by passport and customs men and traversed by regular communications. Of the many wars fought since 1945, virtually all have begun over an undemarcated frontier- a partition line, a ceasefire line or an *ad hoc* line of some kind. A recognized, international frontier still has some value.

A peace treaty would also be a token of good faith- an assurance that the ultimate aim of negotiation is really peace and not the unmaking of the past. If necessary, the process of normalization could be staggered and linked to a staggered territorial withdrawal. As Dr. Haykal remarked, the application of Resolution 242 is asymmetrical in that the Arabs could at any time reverse their compliance whereas Israel could only do so at the cost of another war.

It would be easy to withdraw verbal acceptance of Resolution 242, which in itself is more than sufficiently ambiguous; it would be much less easy to undo the normalization of relations. Diplomatic peace would give no final assurances, and would still leave many problems and dangers, such as changes of regime, government or just policy on the Arab side. It would, however, constitute an important and probably an indispensable step in the direction of a real peace of mutual acceptance.

Both sides have an interest in such a peace. The Arabs can continue the struggle and might eventually succeed in destroying Israel since the Israelis are few and their friends are fickle or far away or both. But to achieve this would require protracted struggle extending over decades or longer and involving a succession of wars. It would wreck the Arab economies, poison their public life, delay or prevent their development and, worst of all, expose them to a far greater danger than Israel could possibly offer- the danger that in trying to recover Palestine they might lose Egypt, Syria, Iraq and the rest, and become vassals or subjects of the one Power which might be willing to encourage and help them in their aim. Even without any decision or action on the Soviet part, this would be the virtually inevitable result of a continuance of the struggle.

The Soviet Interest

Which brings me to my next point:- What is the Soviet position in the present situation? Unfortunately, the Middle East conflict is not just a local or regional one between the Arab States and Israel; if it had been, it would no doubt have been settled long since by the exhaustion of both sides and their realization that neither could impose a solution by force on the other. The Middle East is also one of the most important areas of confrontation between the superpowers- far more important in global terms than, for example, South-east Asia, to which so much effort and attention have been given, on which so much blood and treasure have been spent. The Middle East directly adjoins both Russia and Europe; it includes the main land, sea and air routes to Asia and Africa; it contains the world's greatest reserves of oil, the lifeblood of modern industry and modern armies; it includes the heart lands of Islam, the religion followed by the vast majority of the non-European subjects in the Soviet Union. By controlling the Middle East, Russia could outflank NATO, immobilize Europe, threaten Turkey and Iran from the rear, acquire direct access to Africa, and control the route to the Indian Ocean and the Indian subcontinent, now of crucial importance in the conflict with China. Russia has been concerned with the area for centuries and has steadily and relentlessly advanced her frontiers southward. In 1955, after a period of relative inactivity, she entered a new phase of massive involvement in Arab countries. This began with the arms deal of September 1955 and was greatly extended with indirect and unintentional American help after the Suez War of 1956. Such help was again forthcoming after the war of 1967. Soviet activity was encouraged by the announcement of the Rogers Plan which, whatever its merits, was interpreted in the circumstances in which it was published as a sign of weakness and disinterest; it was further encouraged by the apparent American readiness to turn a blind eye to the immediate and blatant Soviet violations of the standstill agreement of August 1970 by introducing new missiles into the Canal Zone. The detente agreement of May 1972 was again interpreted by the Soviets not as an occasion to reduce the scale of their military activity in Syria and Egypt,

but as a license to increase it. This could be seen in the greater strength, range and flexibility of the Soviet Mediterranean fleet, with its air and shore support and its amphibious capability; the increased Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean following the British withdrawal from the area; and in Soviet military involvement in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Southern Arabia.

The Soviet Role in the War

It has been claimed that the Soviet Union planned and launched the Syro-Egyptian attack on 6 October 1973. There is no hard evidence of this, though the military operations show unmistakable signs of Soviet military thinking and planning. It is, however, certain that even if the Soviets did not launch the offensive, they knew about it for at least several days before it took place.

This is clear, among other things, from the prior evacuation of Soviet families and the stepped up rhythm of Soviet military supplies. The Soviets did not stop the offensive, though it is difficult to believe that they would have failed if they had tried. They did not inform the United States of the impending danger, thus violating one of the most important of the detente agreements. They did nothing to stop the hostilities but, on the contrary, tried to extend the conflict by calling on other Arab States to send their forces and by coaching the Arab oil producers in the use of oil as a weapon against the West. They had already been doing this for some time through Arabic broadcasts and presumably through other channels. As the Arab armies advanced, the Russians fanned the flames- until a change of wind suddenly transformed them from arsonists to firemen.

The Israelis stopped the Arab advance on the third day in the north and on the fifth day in the south. On the fourth day the Soviets began a massive airlift of arms to Egypt and Syria and even arranged for the dispatch of North Korean and North Vietnamese pilots to serve with the Arab air forces. Only when the Israeli counter-offensives were well under way did the Soviets show interest in a cease-fire. They obtained this by threatening to end detente and exploited it immediately by trying, as in August 1970, to introduce new and more sophisticated weapons to the area.

The United States in effect intervened twice in the war, first by organizing her own airlift of supplies in response to that of the Russians and thus saving Israel, and second, by running a diplomatic airlift to stop the fighting and thus saving the Arabs. The replacement of the formula of "no victory, no defeat" is imaginative and constructive. It opens a real possibility for dialogue and negotiation which could lead to a genuine settlement; it also offers an opportunity to disengage the Egyptians, and perhaps others, from the Soviet embrace and persuade them to adopt a more friendly or at least a more neutral posture. The Soviets can, of course, see this as clearly as anyone else and are unlikely to acquiesce quietly in a course of action which would terminate or even reduce their influence in the Middle East and replace it with that of the United States.

The Dilemma of American Policy

Herein lies the dilemma of American policy. To save the Arabs, it was necessary to save the Russians, and we may be sure that they will neither appreciate nor reciprocate this service. To win over the Arabs, it is necessary to restrain the

Israelis, but this could weaken them and thus endanger the main source of America's present diplomatic strength in the Middle East. The game is one requiring great skill, clear and firm purpose, and, above all, no delusions, especially the most perilous of all, self-delusion. For Russia detente is an instrument of policy; for America it could become a substitute for policy, and that would be very dangerous.

Present Soviet Attitude and Intention

At the moment the Soviets appear to be cautious and worried- alarmed by the military results of the war, the successes of American diplomacy so far, and the diplomatic immobility imposed on them by their total linkage to one side. There is the second point, that they are at the moment more concerned with the Chinese than with the Western adversary and therefore inclined to avoid confrontation on matters where the U.S. shows firmness. They are permitting and to some extent even encouraging the movement towards peace, but at the same time are taking the routine precaution of laying a political mine field across the way to peace which they can detonate at any time that peace endangers Soviet interests. Here I would draw your attention to the very important statement ascribed to Gromyko and published in *Al-Ahram* on 22nd January 1974:

"Andrei Gromyko gave assurances of the continuance of Soviet support for the Arab peoples and the people of Palestine and it was clear that he defined the attitude of the Soviet Union in the following points:

Moscow does not oppose any efforts undertaken by the United States in the Middle East as long as these efforts have as their basic objective the protection of the rights of the Arab peoples and the people of Palestine, and as long as these efforts do not injure the interests of a third party.

The Soviet Union will not accept anything less than the Arabs themselves would accept and, if this does not happen, the Soviets will announce their position clearly.

The key to the solution of the Middle East crisis is in the hands of Egypt in the first instance. The Soviets are fully aware of this and they will strive to establish relations with some of the other Arab States.

The attitude of the Soviet Union toward Israel must be clearly defined. It is that the Soviet Union is the friend and strategic ally of the Arabs and that the security and peace of the peoples of the area depend on the solution of the problem of the Palestinian people and the restoration of their rights.

The Soviet Union aims at maintaining relations with all the Arab States, irrespective of their political regimes."

This statement- seen by the more intransigent elements in Egypt as an expression of support for their views- appears to have no immediate relevance in the present situation. It has rather been issued for the record, for possible exploitation

at a later stage if necessary. It tallies with the ambiguous Soviet attitude on the Palestinian question- they appear to oppose the establishment of a Palestinian State but at the same time cultivate the leaders of the PLO and adopt some of their formulae. This has been well described as a built-in destructive mechanism. in any structure of peace-making.

Meanwhile, the American position in the Middle East has been greatly strengthened. In 1967, when the U.S. did not intervene in the war, the Arab States broke off diplomatic relations. In 1973, when American intervention was decisive, Egypt decided to resume relations. The U.S. is now reaping the benefits of a firm policy in terms of prestige and influence. The Soviet Union is for the time being in a state of disarray. Europe has earned the mistrust of Israel, the patronage of the Arabs and the respect of neither. Only the U.S. has, and is seen to have, both power and responsibility. In this there lies a hope for peace.

Extracted from Middle East Background "The Present Stage of the Arab-Israel Conflict" by Prof. B. Lewis in the series "Middle East Background" published by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.