The Middle East: Elusive Security, Indefinable Region
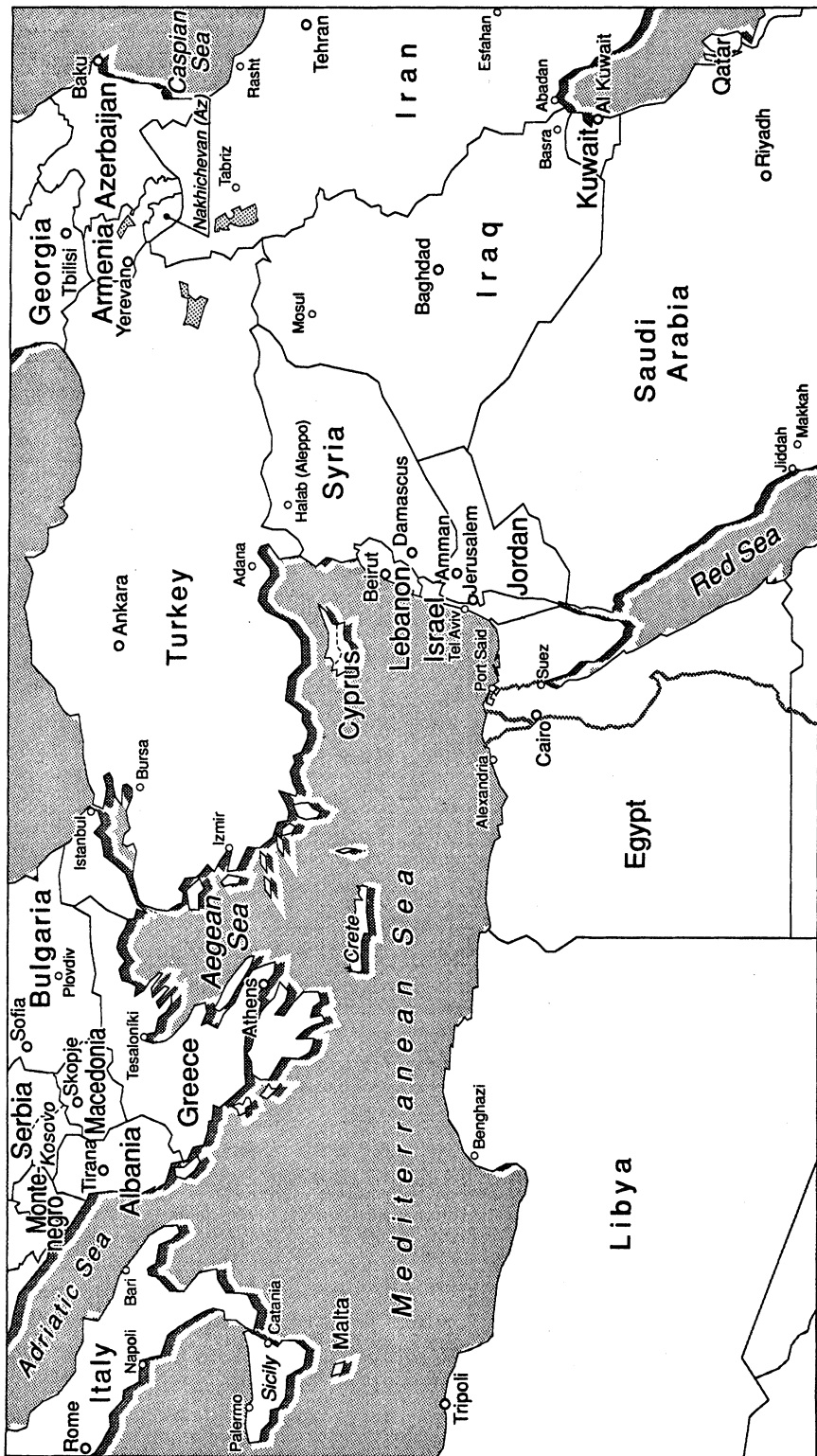
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1. INTRODUCTION

NOW THAT the peace process in the Middle East is firmly underway, the question of security stands much to gain from a fundamental rethinking. Strategic studies 'experts' insensitive to the political dynamics, uninformed about the conflict's cultural dimensions, indifferent to social developments and too unquestioning about the deeper relevance of the concept 'The Middle East' have produced a body of literature boring to read, rarely imaginative and often difficult to adjust into the political context. Calls for disarmament have been laced with such hypocrisy (given the crucial position the region still holds in the arms trade) as to border on the ridiculous. The three conferences dedicated to regional arms control within the multilateral negotiations of the peace process have not yet enabled many creative ideas to emerge. The writing available about 'security' is too often repetitive, outdated, taking the form of an alarmist (depending on the author's position) and more or less accurate (depending on the quality of information available) enumeration of aircraft, missiles and tanks deployed within the zone.

These 'experts', armed with their figures, have painted for us a picture of the Iraqi army as 'fourth in the world' – without explaining, in any convincing way, what has really happened to it since hostilities began. They are usually too obsessed with developments in hardware to be able to study the real profile and possible behaviour of the man in charge of it. Insensitive to social and economic constraints, they add up the military might of the various players, independently of more global constraints on budgetary decisions. They are often taken in by the states, the governments currently in power and the so-called 'national' armies involved; they tend to forget that the *raison de régime* often prevails over the *raison d'Etat*, that armies are as often praetorian as they are national; and they give unwarranted credibility to official statements re-

The East Mediterranean and the Middle East

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garding security matters. Their soldiers seem reified, detached from the societies they come from, counted but rarely deciphered. What needs to be developed is an analysis of the Middle Eastern military – not so much in terms of its political implications (already elaborated by Finer, Perlmutter, Abd el-Malek and others) as of its exact function as a power apparatus and war machine.

2. RAISON D'ETAT AND RAISON DE RÉGIME

It is therefore pertinent to consider several preliminary epistemological questions, the first of which concerns the geographical framework. One does not have to reiterate the ritual polemics as to different possible definitions of the term 'Middle East': some writers seem to reduce the Middle East to nothing but the Arab/Israeli conflict while others stretch it out 'from Marrakech to Bangla-Desh', to quote a famous Foggy Bottom phrase. This question is far from being merely a scholastic enquiry: To speak of 'security' is to define a threat and consequently to make its supposed source explicit in spatial terms. To define a balance of power involves identifying the actors, whether governmental or not, who have to be included in any security equation. Yet the Middle East is a zone whose boundaries are practically impossible to demarcate; thus it is impossible to locate the players to be taken into account when identifying equations of security or causes of insecurity. Should, for example, the Maghreb be included in this equation? Does Iran pose a military threat to Israel or to Egypt? Is the Horn of Africa a real source of concern for Cairo? Should we take account of Turkey in the regional balance of power? Has the collapse of the Soviet empire really pushed Central Asia into the Middle Eastern strategic equation? Such questions provoke highly varied responses from one leader to another, from one analyst to another, cloaking the zone itself in a geo-epistemological fog which renders any attempt to define the theatre and cast of players nearly impossible.

Given a zone with elusive contours and the absence of any central balance of power prevailing over the whole region, it would be relevant to conceptualize security as a trail of gunpowder: once the USSR had developed its nuclear capacity, China had to follow suit, which in turn led India to develop its own capabilities, thus encouraging Pakistan to do the same. Iran and Iraq would then have no choice but to try to acquire this weapon, once both Pakistan and Israel had obtained it. Egypt and Syria could not opt out, nor could Libya; and this would move the nuclear quest westwards, towards Algeria and inevitably Morocco. Now that is a half historical, half imaginary scenario. However, it is very likely and it reveals the reality of the fluidity of frameworks of analysis, of the unceasing mobility of the notion of threat, of the organically diffuse nature of the feeling of insecurity. In a regional system with unclear borders and of dubious existence, this geographical diffusion of threat evidently pushes some players to hold forth endlessly on the various potential sources of danger: a former Israeli minister of defence described a zone of threats, and consequently of potential intervention, a theatre stretching from Morocco to Pakistan. In the

1980s Israel developed ballistic capabilities which ranged over a fair span of Soviet territory. The USSR, in turn, would often argue that its proximity to the zone gave it 'rights' which more distant powers, such as the United States, could not claim.

Another preliminary epistemological concern: as such, the purchase of arms is not necessarily linked to their eventual effective use, or even to their use as a deterrent. The classic correlation between the intensity of a perceived threat and the level of acquisition of new weapons is therefore difficult to verify. This is all the more true of the correlation between any particular weapons system and identification of the hostile actor. Into the game come many factors with little to do with any real military strategy of acquisition. Attempts to rationalize a weapons deal, for technocratic reasons, can always be made before or after a decision has been taken, to justify the purchase of weapons or the choice of one weapons system over another. But it would be naive to be satisfied by such justifications, to take them as hard fact or to imagine that these were necessarily crucial factors in the actual decision. Equally important may be considerations of prestige, of diplomacy (such as the wish to attract the attention and political support of the supplier country) or the desire of some influential leader to pocket juicy commissions on a deal. Which is why the correlation, nonetheless made all round the world, between acquisition of a given weapons system and long-term military strategy still has to be proven. It is utterly risky to induce from a series of military purchases the threat intended by the purchaser or the reality of his vision of security.

A further epistemological concern: threat against whom, exactly? A fundamental weakness of the prevailing expertise is its leaning towards legal-rationalization, to invoke Max Weber's terms. Experts speak of states as if those persons in charge always acted in a context of 'national interests' pertaining to the state-like entities which they head. Without going so far as to opine that the state is an 'imported' structure[1] which will not last, the definition of so-called 'national interests' in relation to many Mid-Eastern countries is often a kind of surrealist exercise. It is, in principle, the *raison d'Etat* which prevails over arms procurement policies. Yet in many Middle Eastern cases, the state is only an external, formal, legal skeleton, the geographical limits of power of a regime whose logic is all the more difficult to discern because it is put forward precisely under the cloak of statist language. My argument is that regimes can be identified as sources of threat more often than states can – which means that a state can suddenly slip from being a 'friend' to being a 'foe' simply because of a coup d'état or a shift in the ruling elite. If it can be understood that the state has weak roots, that it has a temporary form, or at least one which may be reversed, what threatens is the *hic et nunc* policies of a neighbouring regime more often than the supposed 'eternal' ambitions of a nearby state.

This superficial nature of states means that interaction between them will generally be strongly marked by the immediate present or immediate future, not by strategic considerations of old nations. This is because historical hostili-

ties are conjugated in non-state terms: Sunni/Shi'i; the realm of Islam/the realm of war; Arab/Persian; Turk/Arab/Persian. These categories remain emotionally effective motivations in the collective memory, which is why they can be efficiently manipulated whenever needed by whatever regime. On the other hand, these large trans-historical, and sometimes purely ideological categories hardly fit the reality of current nation-states. The most politically effective myths (pan-Arabism, Islamic *Umma*, etc.) thus recur without state-like political apparatuses to embody them. Present states, on the other hand, often find themselves deprived of powerful national myths which can be theirs and theirs alone.

The fragility of state borders, the absence (or at least the weakness) of means of democratic legitimation and the persistence of nostalgia for supra-state political structures (pan-Arabism, for example, or Islamic *Umma*) put these regimes in a position where they have to seek bases of legitimation beyond their own borders. This in turn leads the strongest among them (the mission-oriented regimes) to interference, military intervention, corruption, multi-faceted support for opposition forces in neighbouring states, explicit calls for the overthrow of political regimes or to annexation (spectacular or creeping) of other states, etc. But legitimation through expansion also requires that one should hold one's own in military terms, if possible in spectacular ways, against one's close, rival neighbour. In no way will the military effort ever be explicitly linked to that rivalry between leaders and regimes – but that rivalry will preoccupy people's minds. Conflicts between Arab and Islamic regimes, endemic since independence in these countries, also concern a continual struggle to appropriate trans-state influential myths in an environment where states have not really succeeded in transforming themselves into nations or in endowing themselves, as they went along, with the national myths needed for their social cohesion. The predominance of authoritarian power structures throughout most of the region aggravates this quest for cross-frontier myths: it is always easier for an authoritarian regime to claim to be the proponent of some founding myth than for it to represent democratically a given people.[2]

This disjuncture between what the state needs and how myth functions is not peculiar to Arab and Moslem countries. It is even more acutely true in Israel, where concerns for security inevitably slide from rational analyses of the actual threat posed by Arab neighbours to invocations of a recent, and extremely painful, past. That this past concerns Jews more than it does Israelis, that the theatre where it was played out was Europe and not the Middle East, that Arabs were outsiders to World War II and even more so to the Holocaust, are truths difficult to reconcile with feelings of insecurity in Israel. And this makes the Arabs, particularly the Palestinians, indirect victims of the Holocaust. A profound misunderstanding emanating from this highly emotional confusion of threats complicates any accommodation of the security needs of all involved: the memory of the Holocaust promotes a quest for absolute security which the Arabs, essentially alien to European history, would have difficulty in providing

– were one to suppose that they would decide to do so. On the other hand, Arabs are only too aware of Israel's military and technological superiority, and of its assumed territorial expansionism, to be able to entertain any legitimation of this supremacy and expansionism – a legitimation which would be rooted in other places, other times and in function of a Biblical mythology to which they have no access and feel no inclination. Israel's fundamental position (that there is to be no second Holocaust) is nigh-incomprehensible to its enemies; the Israelis, for their part, appear insensitive to the fact that they are fundamentally perceived throughout the zone as alien looters ('a high-tech crusader state' in the words of the Palestinian Azmi Bishara)[3] who invoke past tragedies so as to impose present, and what seems unchallengeable, domination.

This tension between mythic and state concerns places the regime at the centre of calculations, and its reasoning at the heart of any approach to security: for it is the regime (not the state) which can grasp a given myth (Arabism, Islamism, history of the Jewish people, Persianism, Pan-Turkism etc.) and manipulate it to its own benefit in a legitimation operation where the regime (and often a particular individual heading that regime) seeks to present itself as the vehicle of a myth justifying regional ambitions, which otherwise would be easily condemned under the principle of non-interference. Behind actions taken by Syria, Iraq or Saudi Arabia, one must always identify the calculations made by regimes at least as much as classical *raison d'Etat*, and the politics played out at a daily level around individual decisions taken by Nasser, Saddam Hussein, Khomeini or Hassan II. Crucial military decisions can remain inexplicable if regimes' calculations are not invoked at least concurrently with the *raison d'Etat*. How else can we explain the surprising way in which the Iraqis dealt with Kuwait, the prolonged Syrian presence in Lebanon or the delays in establishing compulsory military service in the Saudi kingdom and in other oil monarchies? These were rational choices made by regimes anxious to survive, rather than decisions inspired by some abstract 'national interest'.

If the *raison de régime* often prevails over *raison d'Etat*, the praetorization of the army is its natural consequence. In many cases mentioned here, the army's key function is a domestic one. 'Experts' have interpreted the doubling of personnel in the Syrian army between 1978 and 1984 as being linked to the Camp David Agreements and to a Syrian desire to establish 'strategic parity' with Israel since Egypt had withdrawn from the Arab–Israeli military equation. This official motive, taken at face value by Syria's opponents (and notably Israel), was indeed able to explain certain decisions at the time (particularly concerning air and ballistic matters); but it would be naive not to connect the timing of this effort to the regime's domestic troubles, specifically to the direct, serious, widespread challenge then posed to the Syrian regime by the Moslem Brothers' Movement, which nearly led to its overthrow. Loyalty to the ruling regime by the officers' corps is therefore an overriding criterion, one with considerable influence on the persistently unbalanced representation of society in the armed

forces: for any regime is willing to sacrifice military power if and when the enployment of its armed forces would negatively affect its survival.

For if the *raison d'Etat* is often nothing more than a disguise for the *raison de régime*, the localization of the threat becomes fundamentally internal, while the external threat is credited with a degree of seriousness proportional to its potential internal effects. Much of the surrealism surrounding the Arab–Israeli conflict, and one of the fundamental reasons for Israel's media success, lies precisely in the seriousness with which the awesome Israeli propaganda machine appears to take Arab threats. Israel has cleverly developed the habit of giving exaggerated credibility to Arab statements of hostility towards it – not so much because the Israelis are unaware of the domestic functions of this legitimation of Arab armament through use of an outside (usually Israeli) threat, but rather because this discourse, useful to Arab regimes on their own account, was equally useful to Israel's image as a permanently vulnerable country. Arab regimes could disguise a logic which is at least partially praetorian by citing the Israeli threat; Israel could wave the hostile discourse of Arab regimes to justify new military acquisitions and score new diplomatic successes abroad. The same discourse could thus serve those who articulated it as much as their opponents, in a game of distorting mirrors which the 'experts' were slow to denounce.

In the Middle East security matters are consequently far less territorialized than in other parts of the world. Public international law is strongly determined by concepts of national territory, borders and sovereignty: this must of course be stressed. But this is an alien (European) cultural tradition with very specific origins, whatever its ensuing universal sway. Where the nomadic tradition (with its recent and often superficial attachment to territory) has prevailed, where political identification has been more determined by lineage than by effective residence, where religious faith has often determined place of residence rather than the other way round, territoriality is a recent category which has only partly taken root. Hence perceptions of security cannot be easily projected onto geographical configurations: there is no protective Pyrenees range, no line of Vosges, no Oder-Neisse, but fundamentally a kind of permanent competition between *'asabiyyas*, each one trying to dominate the other or at least to make it dependent. Much of the history of the region can thus be explained in terms of rivalry (such as the Saudi–Hashemite rivalry) which has been not so much between territorialized countries as between dynasties whose territorial domain was not only undefined but indeed shifting: the Hashemites, for example, were able not only to extend, but in effect to displace their dynastic aspirations from Mecca to Damascus, from Bagdad to Amman and from Basrah to Jerusalem over barely two or three decades. They had difficulty in sustaining a hereditary enemy of any kind (a national if not dynastic one) when they were at one moment being installed by the British, at another being wiped out by them, when their relationship with Israel is made up simultaneously of collusions (to use Avi Shlaim's word for 1948)[4] and

collisions (as in 1967). The same can be said of the Saudis, at least until the Kingdom was proclaimed in its present borders. Most of the 1950s were characterized by the unsuccessful attempts of a Hashemite Iraqi-based prince, Abd al-Ilah, to become king of Syria.

3. WAR-PROVOKING OIL-DINARS

Over and above these epistemological questions, regional insecurity is aggravated by various factors specific to the region, super-imposed on others observed elsewhere (and which will not be discussed here).

Prime among these regional factors are the real strategic stakes in this part of the world, most notably oil. An essential security correlation (though one very rarely made explicit) is to be found between the discovery of fabulous oil reserves in the Middle East, and the birth (or consolidation) of many of the states in the region. It was not mere coincidence that these two processes occurred at the same time. Iraq's northern borders were drawn up with Mossoul oil in mind. The present-day borders of Algeria can be understood in relation to the Sahara oil and gas reserves. Even more important, the state system of the Gulf, mostly established by the 'Uqayr conference (called by London) in 1922, has been determined largely by oil-related calculations.[5] Oil guarantees the very survival of producer-states as states. This explains, for example, the existence of an oil-rich state like Qatar and the parallel non-existence of a sovereign state benefiting the great tribe of the Qawassim. The Kurdish tragedy is to a certain extent linked to the Kirkuk reserves; the unified existence of Libya derives from calculations of the same kind.

3.1 State Survival and Energy Resources

How could this correlation be made explicit? First, since oil is a non-renewable resource, it is difficult to guarantee the survival of numerous states beyond their reserves of energy resources. Now this is a taboo subject, most particularly for those most concerned. But what leaders cannot speak of, the analyst must investigate. The world has surely seen since the beginning of this century a somewhat cancerous multiplication of 'sovereign states', a phenomenon increasingly accentuated since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR and Yugoslavia. On the other hand, we may recall that the previous century had witnessed an inverse tendency, a decrease in the number of state-like entities brought about by German and Italian unification and by colonial expansion. Beyond questions of internal cohesion and chances of survival, the linkage between the existence of certain states and their function as producers of a time-limited commodity is problematic indeed, and lies at the very heart of the 'unmentionable' security fears which they share.

On a short term-basis, as long as oil flows and as long as it constitutes a strategic material, no revision of territorial status quo can occur without a strong reaction from the international system. Saddam Hussein learned this at his own expense (or rather at Iraq's), and before him Nasser on the occasion of

his Yemen (mis)adventure of the 1960s, but Peter Odell had already noted it over 20 years ago: Western powers are strongly supportive of the territorial status quo in zones which produce strategic raw materials.[6] Dependence on oil for the birth of certain states (their original sin) thus goes hand in hand with a clintelistic relationship with these same Western powers who are invited in to defend, if necessary by force, a status quo constantly under threat. However many reasons you may seek for the spectacular intervention by the USA and its allies in the Kuwait War, the basic fact remains: 10% of world's oil reserves lie buried under the hot sands of that emirate.

Now since oil is, by the law of nature, so unequally distributed, it will always provide a war-generating stimulus of the first order. I have elaborated elsewhere the thesis that argues that the political economy of the region is heavily marked by the logic of racketeering, a system by which a protector-raider always lurks close by to oil-producing countries so as to oblige them to pay the bills for the protection promised them, or to raid them by force if they seem too recalcitrant.[7] The example which comes to mind immediately is still a live issue, that of Saddam Hussein's Iraq: how he managed to rally huge contributions from the Gulf oil-monarchies to his military effort to restrain the export of the Iranian Revolution (1980–88) before swapping his role of protective big brother for that of neighbouring raider as soon as the Iranian threat became less pressing. But we must not let the tree hide the forest: this shift from protection to threat is not unique to Iraq, even less to Saddam Hussein. Decades earlier, Nasser had protected Kuwait against the annexing intent of General Qassem – without any qualms at posing, at the very same time, an immediate threat to Saudi Arabia via the Yemen (1962–67). The reticence of member countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) to apply the famous 'Damascus Declaration', extracted from them in the heat of the weeks following the 1990/91 Gulf War, is another symptom of this consciousness deeply rooted in the oil-producing countries, one that leads them to pay dearly for their present protection if they are not to become their raiders of tomorrow.

In many cases, the eventual outcome is that oil-consuming countries with respectable military means at their disposition will maintain a significant interest in the zone and a permanent predisposition to intervene in it. Here we should also note a correlation between the shift of the USA from being a net exporting state to becoming a net importing one, and the rise of US military interventionism in the Middle East. For a long time Washington avoided leading military interventions into this part of the world, for complex reasons linked to the sensitivity of the zone, its proximity to the USSR or the availability of local clients/allies able to defend their own interests and those of the West. With the exception of one extremely limited operation in 1958, the USA – militarily present in Europe and active elsewhere in the world – went through the Cold War without really using its military might in the Middle East. In 1980, a new phase began with a botched attempt to free the hostages in Teheran by force, followed by the bombing of Syrian positions in Lebanon (1983), bomb-

ings personally targeted against Kadhafi's Libya (1986), attacks against the Iranian navy (1988), a spectacular war against Iraq (1991) and, most recently, massive deployment in Somalia (1992). The objectives, dimensions and effects of these interventions are clearly very different, but they all demonstrate relatively recent willingness on the part of the USA to intervene militarily in the Middle East. Historically this is a new feature and cannot be easily dissociated from the shift of the USA to a new status as net oil importer from the early 1980s on.

3.2 Oil Revenues for Arms

A second consequence of the oil factor is the availability, at home or to the benefit of friendly powers, of generous funding for military programmes, which are, in turn, factors that aggravate the 'gunpowder trail' effect mentioned above. These funds have very specific features:

(a) First, we should note the exceptional size of the amounts involved: no region of the Third World has witnessed a flow of more than two thousand billion dollars in barely a decade (1973–1982). But this is exactly what has happened in some ten oil-producing countries in the Middle East. These revenues, even though seriously reduced since 1982 due to fall in production and in prices, remain without parallel elsewhere in the world.

Over and above oil production revenues, other forms of financial flows characterize this region. I am not going here to itemize the tens of billions of dollars Israel has received since its creation from its friends and protectors, both private and governmental, throughout the world, making it no doubt the most generously supported country anywhere. Let us simply recall that, in its many forms, US annual aid to the Israeli state in the course of recent years is equivalent to five times the total of US aid to some fifty countries in black Africa. Since the Camp David Agreements, Israel and Egypt have monopolized more than 40% of US foreign aid. Certain countries also benefit from what can be called 'strategic rent', due to their alignment with their creditors' diplomatic positions (leading, to mention one instance, to the cancellation of USD 17 billion of Egyptian foreign debt during the Kuwait War).

(b) These revenues are often placed in the hands of authoritarian powers who determine budgetary priorities while largely ignoring the needs and aspirations of their own societies. In some cases, oil revenues have entered the actual budget of the ruler, who then deducts part of it for the functioning of the state apparatus. But besides this extreme case, the reality remains: these are financial flows which representatives of society can barely lay hands on, whether the regime be patrimonial-traditionalist or authoritarian-militarized. This arrangement gives governments wide leeway for manoeuvre, which, for various reasons (most notably the obsession with the regime's survival), favours military to the detriment of civilian expenditure.

(c) Finally there is the issue of revenues which the industrialized countries, the oil importers, have made every effort to recycle to their own profit. Often this has led to important arms deliveries, not necessarily essential for the defence of the oil-producing countries, but certainly crucial to arms industries in the supplier countries.

The clearest effect of the availability of these funds is that the Middle East has become a key market for arms suppliers. In 1988, military spending in the Middle East made up 30.1% of public spending (8.8% of the GNP), as against 17.2% in Europe (3.8% of GNP), 13.6% in Africa (4.2% of GNP) and 6.9% (3 to 4 times less) in Latin America (1.3% of GNP). For that same year, military expenditure per capita was USD 344 in the Middle East as against USD11 in Europe, USD25 in Africa and USD27 in Latin America. The Middle East also has the highest world ratio of soldiers in its population: 18.3 soldiers per 1,000, as against 9.1 in the USA, 11.1 in Europe, 3.7 in Latin America and 2.9 in Africa.[8] The Middle East surpasses every other area in the world in the militarization of its economies and societies, and has overwhelmingly overtaken other regions of the non-industrialized world as an arms importer.

Moreover, factors like the presence of these funds, technological and military ignorance of the ruling elites, the speed of oil-dollar recycling in ways that profit industrialized countries and the permanence of conflicts challenging the very existence of these states – all act to aggravate the gap between military programmes and effective needs in matters of defence. The Leclerc tank has in no way the same function, nor the same significance, when integrated into the French armed forces as into those of the United Arab Emirates; the Israeli Mirages have been much more frequently used than their French counterparts. The decision to acquire has in practice been taken in fundamentally different circumstances, even when the weapons are the same. Consequently it can be extremely misleading to apply the *Military Balance* type of approach, emphasizing hardware without questioning the actual value, the real function and the likelihood in the use of these arsenals.

The question of the usefulness of these arms remains a legitimate one. It is relevant to ask to what degree arms sold to Kuwait or to Saudi Arabia actually played a role in the liberation of the former when Iraq invaded and annexed it. It is also legitimate to want to know if it would not have been better to provide certain threatened zones with the infrastructure necessary for eventual foreign deployment of protective forces, rather than provide them with highly sophisticated weapons they can hardly master. This is apparently a question which is now bitterly debated locally as in Western capitals. What is certain is that arms contracts are too serious a matter to be left to the military alone, and that considerations of Western trade balances and business acumen often prevail over military reasoning.

3.3 Understanding Regional Conflicts

A third factor is now evident: the endemic spread and particular nature of civil and regional conflicts, with a disturbing inter-penetration of civil and regional factors: two levels that are all the more intertwined when the state is weak and its borders too recently demarcated. Conflicts in the Middle East do not in fact really have to do with territorial concerns. Since the *lingua franca* of international disputes nowadays is territorial, parties to conflicts in the Middle East tend to translate their demands, their ambitions and recriminations into territorial terms. After all, this is what the world most easily understands: the Algerian–Moroccan conflict is presented as a conflict over the future of the Western Sahara. The one opposing Chad and Libya is defined as a dispute over the 'Auzou. The current conflict between Egypt and the Sudan apparently concentrates on the contested region of Halayeb. Between the Yemen and Saudi Arabia, drawing up borders could be a problem, just as between the Saudi kingdom and Qatar (there was a border incident in September 1992), or the United Arab Emirates or even Kuwait. The first Gulf War was officially a war about territory (sovereignty over Shatt al-'Arab), as was also the second (the Kuwait territory), coveted by Iraq and freed by the coalition. More than any other issue, the question of Arab territories occupied in 1967 lies at the heart of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

However, it would be wrong to think that territorial disputes are as crucial in the definition of regional conflictuality as the rulers of that region would have us believe. Territorial conflict is more a chronic festering sore, a point of crystallization for more political sources of conflict that would not dare proceed to show their true face. How could Cairo and Khartoum convince us that it is indeed the Halayeb zone that is at the origin of their dispute, and not an acrimonious struggle between a now-Islamist Sudanese regime and an anti-Islamist one in Egypt? What territorial stakes could explain the sharp and permanent dispute between Iraq and Syria, which are nonetheless both governed in the name of the Ba'th Party? Whom could the Arabs and Israelis convince that their conflict is primarily territorial? These adversaries speak in territorial terms in order to be understood by the world at large: territorial stakes seem rational, or at least tangible and in any case identifiable, an essential attribute for those who have made conflict resolution a kind of career if not religion. But often, too often, conflicts over a town, a strip, a hill, are merely localized reflections of a deeper conflictuality which is political, tribal, or even religious.

Thus without being utterly unique, the conflicts in the region cannot easily be reduced to their spatial dimension. That is why it is always difficult to count on territorial compromises to guarantee lasting peace. Territorial compromises serve largely as symbols meant to lower tensions, to re-establish non-existent trust, to introduce mutual accommodation. They are indeed useful: one could not imagine, for example, progress in resolving the Israeli–Arab conflict with-

out Israeli flexibility on returning the territories occupied in 1967, especially the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. But the Cold Peace established between Egypt and Israel has remained cold, even though all of Sinai has been restored to Egypt, including the Taba zone. This is because both parties recognize that lasting peace could not avoid taking other factors into consideration, most particularly the fact that Egypt cannot truly normalize its relations with Israel as long as the latter maintained its hostility to the very principle of Palestinian self-determination. In Israel, some had believed that possible; and in Egypt there were analysts who argued that the Palestinian matter was, after all, an issue that did not concern Egypt, but recent years have clearly shown that this was not the case.

The citizens of each of these states cannot be satisfied with a state-related identity. An eminent European minister of foreign affairs expressed his sur-prise at seeing that the North African peoples had such strong feelings about the Gulf War. 'There are 4000 kms between them and it', was his comment. Yes, but other factors – shared history, language, religion – brought them more clearly closer together. Middle Eastern conflictuality is fed not only by various threats but also by underground solidarities. If these solidarities can be ma-nipulated by this or that regime, it is because they are deeply rooted in the political culture. Even before Nasserism and Ba'thism were to make out of pan-Arabism a kind of official religion, generations of young schoolchildren had recited that their homeland stretched 'from Bagdad to Tetouan'. And if a Khomeini minister was able to affirm that 'Islam knows no frontiers', this was because he could feel sure that there were those in his audience who shared his views. Too many announcements of the death of Arab nationalism or pan-Islamism have been written in recent years for us to think today that a Westphalia-type system could have definitively taken root in the region.

3.4 Intervention and Erosion of State Authority

Thus the extreme gravity of recent erosion in state authority across the area. *Locally*, state apparatuses have been demonstrating an increasing inability to cope with the effects of high birth rates, rapid and chaotic urbanization, and a combination of unemployment, corruption and high expectations on the part of the younger generations. *Internationally*, after decades when state sovereignty seemed taken for granted, a new international, post-Cold War 'right' has entered the scene. In the name of humanitarian missions, or the defence of human rights and those of minorities or under some banner of urgency, this new interventionism is now explicitly undermining state sovereignty. One might welcome this development, were it not accompanied by advanced erosion of state power within the borders. The welfare state of past decades is now floundering under the weight of rebellious sectors in the population, explosive social conditions and at times gross economic mismanagement. Thus, the effects of this new international humanitarian/interventionist law

are felt particularly keenly by states built on sand, states already in the process of internal erosion.

These interventions may well alleviate the suffering of some, but they also create new sources of conflict. The countries of the Middle East are now seeing a revival of populist, xenophobic discourses, more often than not draped in religious terms. This new scene is in fact somewhat paradoxical: the end of the Cold War and the development of Western interventionism would seem to have served to introduce a new division, between those who call for even more interventionism and others who cling to classical concepts of sovereignty. Regional alliances and organizations are losing their influence: the unifying concept of non-alignment is fading before our eyes; the North–South socio-economic divide and the more cultural one between East and West are being contested. Following this collapse – less spectacular but by no means less real than the one which occurred in Eastern Europe – Arab and Islamic countries are becoming increasingly divided between those who call for help from the West in the face of a bloodthirsty dictator, an expansionist neighbour, or a revolution aimed to export its model, and others who denounce all that in the name of national independence, of anti-imperialism or, more commonly, of Islam. With a call for imperial protection on one side, a descent into xenophobic chauvinism on the other, the mixture of fascination and repulsion which the West exercised over peoples of this region is now dissolving into an anguished SOS from those who depend on the West for their survival – and, from their opponents, a revolt against the return of the white man. A cultural and ideological chrysalis is breaking open, leaving the West perplexed, when indeed it manages to shake off some of its indifference.

A disturbing silence, broken only by new appeals for firmness, has thus settled around the case of Iraq, now placed under what is actually a form of tutelage to the West and the USA in particular. Indeed this country was guilty of invading its neighbour. But the heavy yoke imposed on it after the Gulf War is of the kind which is aggravating feelings of injustice throughout the region. It is not that Saddam Hussein is particularly charismatic, nor that the invasion of Kuwait was supported by Arabs. But the contrast remains too strong be-tween the relentless unleashing of force against an Arab and Muslim country, and shameless complacency vis-à-vis all the Milosevics, Rabins, Cedras and other such leaders who have clearly shown how little weight they give to resolutions taken by the UN Security Council. The coalition of some 30 coun-tries has thus been reduced to three Western countries who resumed attacks on Iraq and firmly kept it under a severe regime of embargo and sanctions, while several of their former allies, mostly those in the region itself, have made a point of dissociating themselves from their actions. This situation cannot be left forever vulnerable to the bravado of leaders like Bush or Clinton. The lifting of sanctions against Iraq must become the order of the day once again. Three long years have vividly shown that the people of that country have suffered from sanctions much more than has its regime, and that sanctions have more to do

with particular irritation than with any strategy of establishing a so-called 'new world order'.

3.5 The Arab–Israeli Conflict

To this atmosphere, already marked by a high level of conflictuality, the Arab–Israeli conflict has added an extremely complex dimension of which the distinguishing features are:

(a) First, the permanent oscillation between local and regional levels. The conflict began as a communal dispute in Mandated Palestine between the Palestinian population and Jewish settlers. After the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Palestinian dimension became somewhat overshadowed by an intensive regionalization that made this conflict the focus of regional forces and even of competing forces from outside, especially the two superpowers. With the creation of the PLO, and especially with the start of the Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) in 1987, the local (Palestinian/Israeli) dimension prevailed once again, only to be threatened again by a re-regionalization of conflict by inter-state islamist militancy. This oscillation has made the conflict harder to resolve since its multiple dimensions need to be accommodated simultaneously.

(b) The Arab–Israeli conflict is also a textbook case of the internationalization of communal/regional disputes, vividly illustrated by the successful attempts to model it on the East–West conflict during the Cold War decades. This tendency was clearly demonstrated by the nuclear alerts which, in both the USA and the USSR, accompanied the two Israeli–Arab wars of 1967 and 1973.[9] Of late Israel has been trying a new form of internationalization through its attempts to present its occupation and repression of national Palestinian sentiment as an integral part of a universal struggle against 'Islamic fundamentalism'. Obviously, Israel has a keen interest in seeking to 'drown' its own peculiar national interests in a larger framework where Israel can be presented as an advanced bastion of some international coalition – one which was opposed to Soviet expansionism yesterday, which is nowadays directed against 'terrorism' and which tomorrow might focus against Islamist 'revivalism'. This has been a way for Israel of garnering international support for its own interests and of demonstrating its 'strategic value' to Western objectives in the Middle East. The Soviet Union has been too happy to support the other side and to find through it a door to Mid-Eastern politics. With the end of the Cold War, the risks of internationalization may have faded, but they have not disappeared entirely.

(c) This conflict has also been a moving force behind an intensified competition in advanced military technology. Feelings of isolation and organic vulnerability within Israel push it to acquire and/or develop the very latest in weaponry, so that 'quality can always prevail over the quantity'. But since Zionist doctrine is strongly linked to territorial expansionism, Israel has developed the dual ambition of holding on firmly to both its territorial

acquisitions and to its technological supremacy. This twofold preoccupation has made the conflict difficult to manage, for Israel's opponents have difficulty accepting that Israel can win 'on both fronts'. While looking forward for a different equation for these two givens (where Israeli superiority in techno-military matters would be recognized, for example, in exchange for handing back the territories), Israel is an essential factor in the arms race and especially the lone (to date) successful vehicle of nuclearization of the Middle East.

(d) Finally this conflict has demonstrated a dangerous and permanent shift from national, ideological or political categories into the minefield of religion. Religious feelings are hardly conducive to compromise – especially when they are so strongly tribalized. Israel can consider itself a secular state if it wants; it is still perceived by its enemies and friends alike as a Jewish state. On the other hand, the PLO's attempts to present the conflict as a national, political conflict are dangerously challenged by the rise of religious militancy among the Palestinians and throughout the whole Middle East. This challenge could end up by taking over unless some global, lasting, fair and acceptable settlement can be found rapidly.

4. REASONS FOR HOPE?

Despite this relatively pessimistic diagnosis, a reasonable level of optimism still can be entertained for the years ahead. New, strong tendencies are appearing that allow us to expect that the radical changes occurring throughout the world cannot leave this region untouched. Let us review briefly some of these new factors and speculate on their effect:

(a) The drop in oil revenues over the last ten years, combined with the huge increase in the financial burden of the welfare state, is putting strong limits to Middle Eastern military expenditure. This is the central thesis of an excellent, recently published monograph by Yahya Sadowski.[10] Between 1980 and 1990, oil revenues decreased by 37% in Qatar, 45% in Kuwait, 62% in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the foreign debt of most of these countries has only increased: it was, in 1990, some USD 16.6 billion for Syria, 23.5 billion for Morocco, 26.8 for Algeria and over 40 billion for Egypt. Iran, which in 1988 had almost no foreign debt, has amassed one of more than USD 20 billion in less than five years, which led that country to decelerate its re-armament drive some time in mid-1992. To that must be added a rate of annual population increase in the order of a 3% for the region as a whole. All of these factors taken together must weigh on the governments to slow down their military expenditure. Moreover, in the USA voices are being raised to have foreign aid no longer dominated by the Middle East, holding that stability in Russia, for example, is at least as important for US interests as is Israeli well-being. And again, the Gulf War, with an estimated global bill of some USD 170 billion for the regional parties involved, will make its weight felt for a long time. Finally, any spectacular rise in oil prices in the years to come is generally considered unlikely.

In his monograph, Sadowski is right to lay out these optimistic factors and does so convincingly. It still remains that this also has its cost. It must first be said that the Gulf War has been followed by spectacular arms spending, rather than the reverse. Next it has to be said that the interesting Jordanian proposal, to swap a cancellation of foreign debts of Mid-Eastern countries against a substantial reduction of their military expenditures, remains a dead end.[11] So do meetings of the Five, the promises of George Bush or the multilateral negotiations within the peace process framework. It is also worth commenting that the new Clinton Administration, remaining in this instance (once is not a habit) loyal to its electoral promises, has committed itself to maintaining, if not strengthening, Israel's military supremacy. And this does nothing to reassure the Arabs. Furthermore, for the same amounts of money more arms can now be bought, especially from ex-Warsaw Pact countries whose weapons are now on offer at very competitive prices.

At a deeper level, the drop in oil revenues is itself the cause of new conflicts. These will not necessarily be expressed in big engagements that have become hard to finance, but may surface as aggressive populism, often characteristic of financially anaemic regimes throughout the world. It was precisely the difficulty in finding finances which pushed Iraq, like so many other countries before it, towards foreign expansionism. The inability of countries to require new sacrifices of their peoples, which was yesterday a marginal phenomenon in this wealthy region, could become a chronic worry – all the more so because the Middle East has already had its Eldorado phase, and governments could be incapable of telling their subjects this can no longer be anything but a memory of the past any more.

(b) The end of the Cold War has significantly diminished the strategic importance of the region, but it has also permitted the West – and especially the USA – stronger control over military deliveries to the region. But constraints on supply have proved a failure in the past: demand has to fall; suppliers do not make the market, especially in military matters whatever the Chicago school says. It certainly is a relief that, with the disappearance of the bipolar world, forms of patron/client relations between the industrialized world and certain countries in the region are somewhat eroded, if not completely over. But Israel's insistence that arms control in the Middle East be carried out basically by the suppliers is hardly acceptable to the Arab countries, who view Israel as a country which has demonstrated its ability to feed most of its arsenal with its own technological capabilities whereas they need external suppliers to remain in the competition. Hence the deadlock in arms control negotiations: Israel insists on supplier restraint while the Arabs insist on parity between the two sides; Israel wants to keep its edge in nuclear and other mass-destruction capabilities while the Arabs, led by Egypt, call for the elimination of all these arms. The end of the Cold War has yet to show its effects on these highly sensitive issues.

On the other hand, conflicts in the Middle East were not mere reflections of the Cold War: the Arab–Israeli conflict, for example, preceded the Cold War; it ran parallel to it, interweaving with it, and has clearly outlived it. Hasty extrapolations must therefore be avoided. As we can clearly see elsewhere, especially in Europe: the end of the Cold War has as often led to the unleashing of strong destabilizing forces as to resolving conflicts. Likewise in the Middle East: all the more so since arms suppliers are no longer restrained by political or strategic considerations; the mercantile philosophy in arms sales, Chinese or North Korean style, is already partly shared by some successor states to the USSR.

(c) Efforts are being made to resolve seemingly intractable conflicts, starting with the Palestinian question. The peace process launched in Madrid in the wake of the end of the Cold War and of the second Gulf conflict, held great promise. Soon, however, it appeared that confidence-building measures, bilateral and multilateral processes in parallel, and the US promise to be 'a driving force' cannot easily resolve the essence of the problem: the right of Palestinians to a homeland. Only the recognition of this fact by their opponents, the power occupying them, could have allowed the acceleration of the process.

For reasons of its own, the USA, while firmly holding to its role as the real exclusive sponsor of the operation (rejecting any UN or European input in the process foundations) were very late in recognizing the obvious: that the heart of the conflict was the Palestinian issue; that there was no alternative to direct PLO handling of the negotiations; and, finally, that prior mutual recognition of these two parties was a precondition for progress. Fortunately, other parties proved more willing to take these obvious givens into consideration. This in turn precipitated the Oslo Accords, a real breakthrough after almost two years of unproductive formal talks.

Though a landmark, this development is far from sufficient to alter dramatically the security scene in the Middle East. Months after the Oslo Accords were concluded, negotiations between the two parties proved to be rather hard in view of the many vague dispositions in the Accord; the inclusion of the other three parties (Syria, Lebanon and Jordan) in the post-Oslo process proved far more problematic; while negotiations on arms control remained stalled by Israel's refusal to discuss weapons of mass destruction (particularly nuclear) or to consider an arms control process which would be regional rather than left to supplier self-restraint. The Oslo Accord certainly helped in opening the door to more relaxed discussions on mutual suspicions and fears, but a century-old conflict is not likely to be settled in the course of a few weeks.

(d) Without calling this a wave of democratization, we should note that discussion of military matters is gradually losing its taboo status. When even a minimum of political participation is allowed, popular interrogation of the usefulness and effectiveness of military expenditures becomes inevitable. Even in a country like Saudi Arabia, it was noteworthy that the authors of a recent opposition pamphlet dedicated a whole section to the military question and the

use of armed forces, suggesting policies which are very different from the ones presently espoused by the Saudi government. In Lebanon, a public debate has been launched about the optimal size and exact function of an army which has finally been united after years of civil war. In Kuwait the National Assembly elected in autumn 1992 has demonstrated a determined will to question military expenditures, overseas investments and the state of military prepardness. Of course, the military domain, cloaked in thick veils of national security framed as dogma, is the last to be subjected to the law of access for public information and accountability. All the same, it is no longer as immune as it was in the past to investigations by parliamentarians, opinionmakers or ordinary citizens.

These are factors which can permit at least a modium of optimism. They are, however, ambiguous factors in that they can turn back on themselves, if not generate new sources of conflict. A widespread impoverishment of governments; a peace process which produces no tangible, irreversible results on all fronts; escalating public concern about matters of security and arms; a much more mercantilistic approach to arms trade; a growing gap between rich and poor in the region; substantial renewal of US military support to Israel – these are also factors for anxiety. But time is of the essence: unless ambitious, determined actions to resolve conflicts can be initiated in the immediate future, the stability of the leaders (one of the main givens of the past twenty years) will soon be up for grabs. The world would then have to face new leaders who could engage in populist or even religious policies, which can prove even harder to accommodate.

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