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NSC Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, 'Basic US Interests In the Middle East'

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Summary:

The paper provides an overview of American policy in the Middle East, including main interests and their importance, the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East, and threats to NATO.

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NSC INTERDEPARTMENTAL GROUP
FOR NEAR EAST AND SOUTH ASIA

BASIC US INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

This paper examines some of the basic interests and assumptions that underlie US policy formulation in the Middle East. Alternative views on the following questions are addressed: (1) How important are our interests in that area? (2) How grave is the Soviet threat to these interests? (3) To what extent does the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East threaten NATO? (4) What is the present US position in the area? (5) How important is an early Arab-Israel settlement to the preservation of our interests? (6) What posture should the United States adopt vis-a-vis the conflicting states and groupings of states in the area?

1. What are our interests and how important are they?

In the Northern Tier of the Middle East region, the independence and integrity of our NATO allies, Greece and Turkey, and perhaps of Iran are generally recognized as vital US interests.

While there is also general agreement that the area south of the Northern Tier, comprising the Eastern Arab world and Israel, is important, the degree of its importance is debatable. At one end of the spectrum is the view that the area as a whole is vital on the grounds that it represents, in toto, a conglomerate of Western interests whose loss would tip the global strategic balance in favor of the Soviets. This view leans heavily on the importance of Arab oil to the Free World and the need to prevent its becoming a pawn subject to the whims of regimes under Soviet influence or control. Supporters of this view argue that the Arabs control the only geography and resources of vital importance to us in the area and would have us cast our lot firmly with the Arabs.

At the other extreme, it is argued that the foregoing view is based on outmoded strategic concepts (e.g., we no longer

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rely on forward air bases) and on an oversimplified picture of the Arab world as a homogeneous entity. While not denying the importance of Arab oil to the Free World, supporters of this position argue that the oil flow will not be interrupted for political reasons because the Arabs have nowhere to market their oil except Western Europe. As a corollary, it is also argued that the US commitment to Israel makes that nation's security a vital US interest--an argument frequently bolstered by the contention that a strong Israel offers the best hope for holding the line against further Soviet penetration of the Middle East.

Neither of these theses, it seems to us, correctly defines the degree and ways in which the Arab-Israel area of the Middle East is important to the United States. It is difficult to prove that this area is vital to our security, in the sense that our own survival would be threatened by the extinction of any state in the area. With the possible exception of Israel, which is a special case, developments in or affecting a given country at a given time do not vitally affect the United States. On the other hand, the collective or substantial loss of the area to the Free World by incorporation into the Soviet orbit would present a serious long-term threat to the American position in the world.

Although we have no treaty commitment to the preservation of Israel's security, there is a long-standing national consensus that we have a basic interest in Israel's survival. That fact, and Arab opposition to Israel's existence, complicate the analysis. Leaving aside subsidiary though significant considerations related to investment, trade and communications, we are perforce deeply involved in the Middle East for two fundamental purposes: (1) because we wish to assure the survival of Israel, and (2) because, in terms of our global strategic interests, we do not wish the land mass, population and resources of the eastern Arab world to fall under Soviet domination. We seek the achievement of both purposes. But, given the underlying forces of conflict in the area, pursuit of either purpose tends to militate against achievement of the other. While neither purpose is "vital" in the strict sense that failure to achieve it would require us to go to war to safeguard our national security, both are of sufficient importance that we cannot disengage from the area without sustaining a serious blow to our Great Power position.

Under any definition of our interests in the Arab-Israel situation, the avoidance of military confrontation between the Soviets and ourselves is the Number One priority. Next in order of priority are the prevention of the introduction by a Middle East power of strategic missiles or nuclear weapons into the area, the

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avoidance of a situation in which the use of US military forces in the Arab-Israel conflict would be necessary and the avoidance of another war itself between Israel and the Arabs. Beyond that, we see a continuing American interest in Israel's ability to defend itself against any combination of Arab states and in Western access to Arab oil as well as to transit and communications through the area.

2. How grave is the Soviet threat? The Soviet Union continues its efforts to reduce Western, and particularly American, positions and influence in the Middle East, and to expand its own. It has established strong--but not "dominant"--positions in the UAR, Syria, and Iraq. It has replaced the bulk of the military equipment lost in the war by these states. It has increased the number of its military advisors substantially. It has sought to exploit opportunities to expand Soviet influence in the Yemen and the new state of South Yemen. The Soviets have bartered military equipment to Iran and have offered military assistance to Jordan and Lebanon. The Soviet Navy has been strengthened in the Mediterranean, and Soviet ships have made port calls in the Indian Ocean--Persian Gulf area. The Soviet Navy has been allowed greater use of Egyptian ports and repair facilities, and a small number of Soviet aircraft (with Egyptian markings) have been conducting reconnaissance operations over the Sixth Fleet.

However, while the Soviets have undeniably made great gains in the Middle East in the past dozen years, it can also be said they were starting from zero and are still a long way from "dominating" the area. The Northern Tier states (Greece, Turkey, and Iran) are strongly concerned over the expansion of Soviet influence over the Arab states. Among the Arabs themselves, indigenous forces of nationalism, xenophobia and desire for full independence are major obstacles to the achievement of Soviet aims. Regional and bilateral rivalries among the Arabs militate against Soviet dominance. Language, religion, and other cultural factors also play their part.

Therefore, powerful indigenous and limiting forces make it unlikely the USSR can ever "dominate" the area, but the high-water mark of Soviet potential influence has not been reached.

3. Is NATO threatened? There are those that see Soviet successes in gaining access for their military forces in Arab states as the beginning of an outflanking of NATO and the Northern Tier, which could become critical if the Soviets are given full-fledged use of Arab territory for military purposes, including

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possibly emplacement of strategic missiles. It is our judgment, however, that the threat to NATO is manageable and likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. The Arabs are unlikely to grant the USSR full-fledged military bases on their territory. Even if they did, it would not basically affect the policies of Greece and Turkey, which would continue to play their roles within NATO. The expansion of Soviet naval activity in the Mediterranean has mainly political rather than military significance.

4. What is the current US position in the Middle East? There are those who see the June 1967 war and its aftermath as having dangerously accelerated the erosion of US influence in the Middle East. The trend toward polarization has intensified, driving the radical Arab states further into the Soviet orbit and making it increasingly difficult for the Arab moderates to maintain ties with the United States. On the other hand, some see our position as difficult but not by any means untenable over the longer run. In this view, the Arabs and Soviets recognize and respect the great power they know we can bring to bear in support of our interests in the Middle East. The Arab moderates will maintain their ties with us because it is in their interest to do so. Our basic position has not really been hurt by the loss of influence in radical Arab states.

To place the foregoing conflicting views in perspective, it is necessary to understand the fundamentals on which the US position in the Middle East is based. Unlike some other areas where the US position is anchored in alliance systems sometimes coupled with a military presence, in the Arab-Israel area the US position rests largely on how other states, both within and outside the area, assess our capacity and intentions vis-a-vis their own objectives. Viewed in this sense, the principal positive elements of the US position in the Arab-Israel area can be summarized as follows:

(a) Recognition by the countries of the Middle East that the United States is a major global power with the capability, if it chooses to use it, to bring its power to bear in the area.

(b) Desire on the part of the countries of the Middle East for the United States to provide a counterweight against Soviet domination. This consideration weighs more heavily in the Northern Tier and the moderate Arab states than among the radical Arabs but is a factor with the latter as well.

(c) Recognition on the part of the Arabs and the USSR that only the United States has the potential to influence and

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restrain Israel, which is today the strongest military power in the Arab-Israel complex and which the Arabs see as a threat to themselves.

(d) Recognition by Israel that US support is fundamental to its national existence over the long run.

(e) Arab recognition that the US presence--financial, managerial, and technical--in Arab oil development, production, and marketing, while important to the United States, is also important to the Arabs at the present juncture.

(f) The pro-United States orientation of many members of the Arab elite based on deep-rooted historical, religious, and educational associations.

Viewed in light of these factors, the US position is neither as bad as the Cassandras claim nor as unshakable as their detractors insist. Our position is still significant, but it is probably vulnerable to the erosion of time. At the present juncture, the key elements of strength in our position are (a) the Arab and Soviet recognition that we alone could exercise some effective influence over Israel, and (b) the Israeli awareness of how important our support is for Israel's survival. However, if the Arabs lose hope that we will use our influence, or if the Israelis conclude that we will not use it no matter what they do, these elements of strength will become rapidly wasting assets and our potential for playing a decisive role in the area will be seriously diminished.

Furthermore, despite the various positive elements in our position as sketched out above, it is only too clear that there are limits on how far we can influence any state in the area on any given issue. For example, the Israelis evince a fierce independence of any outside influence on issues which they consider basic to their survival as a state. And it is still most uncertain whether we (or the USSR) can bring sufficient influence on the Arabs, and particularly the radical Arabs, to accept what we would consider as a reasonable settlement.

5. How important is an early Arab-Israel settlement to our position in the Middle East? Israel wants "true peace," but the Arabs are not ready for it. The relevant question is whether any Arab state or Israel is prepared in the near future to make the compromises and concessions necessary to the conclusion of a political settlement that would at least defuse the situation and offer a reasonable basis for stability.

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The Government of Israel is the leading advocate of the view that the Arabs are not ready to move for a true peace. The Israelis contend, furthermore, that neither Israel nor the United States need be in a rush to settle for something less that would not remove the roots of Arab hostility. The problem with the latter view, in our judgment, is that it ignores certain dynamics in the Middle East that contain risks for the United States if a settlement is not soon achieved. These include the possibility of a collapse of the regime in Jordan if it cannot recover the West Bank, with potentially dangerous repercussions elsewhere in the area; the growing strength of the fedayeen which could limit the freedom of action of the UAR and Jordan to move toward a settlement; and the opportunity for the USSR to expand its influence with the Arabs under conditions of continuing Arab-Israeli hostility.

6. What posture should the United States adopt in the Middle East? It is generally agreed that the US position in the Middle East (and particularly in the Arab world) has deteriorated and is in some jeopardy; also, that the best chance of improving our position would lie in an early Arab-Israeli settlement. It is also agreed that we should continue our close alignment with Greece, Turkey, and Iran.

The basic alternative answers to the question of what posture we should adopt, then, hinge on differing assumptions concerning certain key issues involving the Arab states and Israel: the possibility of achieving a reasonably general settlement in the near future; and the importance of US relations with the Arab states broadly, and particularly with the radical Arab states.

All are agreed that it will be very difficult, and perhaps not possible, to achieve a reasonably general peace settlement between the Arabs and Israel in the near future. Argument centers on whether there is enough hope to make it worthwhile to pursue the effort, or whether we should conclude that a general settlement is not now in the cards and concentrate instead on a settlement between Israel and Jordan.

(a) One view is that there continues to be some reasonable hope for a settlement that would encompass both the UAR and Jordan and thus resolve major elements of the Arab-Israel problem. Given the importance of such a settlement, we should emphatically not give up on the effort at this time. This view also holds that a narrower settlement between Israel and Jordan is not feasible because Jordan does not have the strength to break with its radical Arab neighbors on this issue, and that an effort by Hussein to reach a bilateral agreement with Israel would mean the end of his regime.

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(b) A second view is that the UAR and Israel will not be able to come to a political settlement, and that our efforts should now be directed toward achieving a separate Israel-Jordan settlement. This view holds that an Israel-Jordan settlement could be the first step to a broader agreement. It also contends that we can be more influential with Israel if we confine our efforts in this regard to the more limited bilateral settlement. The risks to Hussein are recognized, but the gamble is advocated because the present trends, if continued, probably mean he will be eliminated in any case, and also because our arming of both Israel and Jordan becomes harder to explain and defend.

As for relations with the Arabs, there is considerable sentiment that we cannot protect and promote our enduring interests unless we base ourselves broadly in the area. This view accepts the particular importance of keeping good ties with the moderate Arab regimes (such as Jordan) but holds that we cannot count on the survival of those regimes under conditions of acute tension between the Arabs and Israel; these conditions impel the moderate states (including those in North Africa) to become increasingly radical and increase the opportunities for the expansion of Soviet influence. It is therefore essential, in this view, to benefit from opportunities to improve our relations with the radical Arab states.

A second view notes that the potential growth of Soviet influence in the Arab world is limited primarily by the internal forces in the Arab states, and holds furthermore that unless we are willing to compete at high cost with the USSR in the radical states, our influence in these states can only be marginal under presently foreseeable circumstances. It holds that to maintain broad ties with the radical Arab states would adversely affect our relations with other states, especially the moderate Arab states and Iran; that especially in the absence of a settlement, such broad ties would not mitigate the adverse effects on moderate regimes of fedayeen activities; that it is in the Northern Tier, Israel, and the moderate Arabs that our primary interests lie; and therefore we should remain aloof from greater involvement with the radical Arabs.

In summary, the issues faced by the United States are highlighted by two differing viewpoints:

(1) A broad Arab-Israeli settlement is very important and there is enough possibility of achieving it to make its continued pursuit worthwhile. It is important that we seek to establish a broader base for our relations and possible influence with the Arabs, but not at Israel's expense. We should continue to

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press Israel to agree to withdrawal from major territories it occupied in June 1967, in return for a peace settlement. We must simultaneously exert all the influence we have to prevent Israel from going the route of nuclear weapons and strategic missiles.

(2) A broad settlement, although desirable, is not possible in the near future; without writing off publicly or completely our hope for a more general settlement, we should concentrate on bringing about a bilateral settlement between Israel and Jordan; we have little to gain in expanding our relationship with the radical Arabs, and should not compete with the Soviets; it would be improper and perhaps impossible to force Israel to give up the militarily important Sinai to a hostile Egypt; our highest and most immediate priority with Israel is to prevent the introduction of strategic missiles and nuclear weapons.

The posture summarized in the first viewpoint is considered preferable by the Interdepartmental Group with the exception of the Defense (ISA) representative. The Defense (ISA) preference is represented by the second viewpoint above.

Both courses would call for a greater involvement by the United States than at present in the affairs of the area. Both assume that the United States retains elements of strength in the Middle East; we need not be panicked into precipitate actions or abandonment of sound positions out of fear that the Soviets are about to take over. On the other hand, there are no grounds for complacency. Our approach should be one of deliberate speed, to take advantage of opportunities attendant on the advent of a new US Administration. Under either viewpoint, it is only realistic to recognize that the realities of the situation in the area and of the limits on external influence are such that the odds for any political settlement between the Arabs and Israel cannot be rated high. As we seek progress along this line, we should also be examining how we can best protect our position in the area in the continued absence of a settlement.

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