

REVIEW OF BOOKS

Confrontation: The Middle East & World Politics

By Walter Laqueur

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The contemporary writer who seeks to accomplish a treatment of the latest Arab-Israeli war and its regional and global dimensions is in more difficult and urgent straits than his counterpart in the immediate post—1967 period. Then, the need to assess responsibility for the crisis and to suggest modes for its resolution was not imperative.¹ Neither antagonist fitted clearly into the traditional mode of “the belligerent”. Each of the parties took political risks in employing threatening language. The party who stood to gain the most—closure of the Straits of Tiran—miscalculated. A tragic spiral of hardly foreseeable events and consequences transpired, leading ultimately to the conflagration.² When it was over the West emerged stronger. A diplomatic framework for a negotiated settlement soon evolved. The crisis was contained and general optimism prevailed over the prospects of greater stability in that region of the world.

By contrast, the 1973 war was the product of premeditation and conspiracy, sheathed by the guise of detente. In its wake, Europe and Japan have been reduced to political impotence and economic subordination. There is global fear that the events of 1973 and 1974 may be only the prelude to more aggravated difficulties in the future.

In this context, the serious public demands of the contemporary writer a work that surpasses mere chronicle and grapples with the questions of responsibility, modes for settlement and viable responses to the continuing crisis. Walter Laqueur, the prolific writer and commentator on Middle East affairs and world politics,³ has, not unexpectedly, written such a book. Although his stated aim is “to provide an anatomy of a local crisis that became a world conflict” (preface), he goes beyond anatomization. His work offers diagnosis and prescription.

Responsibility

Egypt and Syria's attack, we are told, was motivated by their conclusion that alternative methods for reacquisition of their lost territories were non-

¹See, for example, M. Reisman, *The Art of the Possible: Diplomatic Alternatives in the Middle East* (1970) where the author admirably stays clear of allocating guilt, limiting his task to identifying “legitimate interests” in the conflict as a means toward formulation of diplomatic options for producing a settlement.

²See, however, regarding the question of foreseeability, H. Haykal, “An Armed Clash with Israel is Inevitable — Why?”, *Al Ahran*, May 26, 1967.

“It is in the light of the compelling psychological factor that the needs of security, of survival itself, make (Israel's) acceptance of the challenge of war inevitable . . . That next move is up to Israel. Israel has to reply now. It has to deal a blow. We have to be ready for it, as I said, to minimize its effect as much as possible. Then it will be our turn to deal the second blow, which we will deliver with the utmost effectiveness.”

Reproduced in W. Laqueur (ed.), *The Israel-Arab Reader* 180, 185 (1969). See, generally, for an analysis of the factors leading to the outbreak of war in 1967, A. Gerson, “Trustee-Occupant: The Legal Status of Israel's Presence in the West Bank”, 14 *Harvard International Law Journal* 1, 12-22 (1973).

³See *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* (1956), *The Middle East in Transition* (ed.) (1958), *The Soviet Union and the Middle East* (1959), *The Road to War, 1967-8* (1968), and *The Israel-Arab Reader* (ed.) (1969).

existent. Israel was consolidating its hold, the West was losing interest and time was running out. Israel was intransigent and lacked diplomatic creativity. At least four opportunities for peace were bungled—in the immediate post 1967 period, in October 1967, in August 1970 at the end of the war of attrition, and in the nine months subsequent to Nasser's death and Sadat's assumption of power. "Levi Eshkol's government and later Golda Meir's voted for immobility. It had no long term concept of a settlement. True, the government made (or accepted) various peace proposals, but there was widespread relief when the Arabs in their intransigence rejected them, for the status quo seemed greatly preferable to any agreed settlement" (43). Israel's victory had an unbalancing effect on the country leading to a mystical quasi-religious revival that in turn clouded the government's sense of reality. "What can be safely said", he concludes, "is that the settlement likely to emerge after the fourth war will be of a kind that the Israeli government could have obtained without undue difficulty after the Six Day War" (254). "Had the Israeli danger loomed less large, had it not overshadowed everything else, there might not have been a new war in 1973." (35)

Taken in this context the argument that is posited, at least implicitly, is that Israel's intransigence, influenced by a transcendental revival within the country, impeded a settlement and that the Arab response was not an altogether unreasonable one.⁴ It is an argument that is gaining increasing popularity, not least in European diplomatic circles. Recently *Newsweek's* De Borchgrave asked European experts at a roundtable discussion on the prospects of an impending world economic collapse whether the Europeans had not generally turned more pro-Arab as a result of their fear of a further oil embargo. Their response is illustrative. "1967 was a watershed because magnanimity was sadly lacking in that victory. And since then Israel progressively alienated our sympathy . . . (We) long for them to do something creative diplomatically."⁵

The facts and arguments that Prof. Laqueur marshals to substantiate his assertion are the following: Israel should have withdrawn from most of the occupied territories immediately after the 1967 war without extracting any conditions in return. Admitting that the humiliation of defeat would have remained, the effect of such a gesture, he suggests, would have been to

⁴For an exposition of the view that the Arab attack may have been justified in international law see I.F.I. Shihata, "Destination Embargo of Arab Oil: Its Legality Under International Law" 68 *American Journal of International Law* 591, 607 (1974). "Egypt, in particular, expressed officially its readiness to enter into a peace agreement with Israel containing all the obligations provided for in Security Council Resolution 242 (1967) as broadly elaborated by the Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General. In response, Israel defiantly insisted on territorial expansion. With such an intransigent Israeli position, encouraged in fact by the near total support of the U.S. Government and by the acquiescence of most other Western Powers, little choice was left for Arab states to regain control over their occupied territories." See in response, E. V. Rostow "The Illegality of the Arab Attack on Israel in 1973" 68 *American Journal of International Law* (forthcoming).

⁵*Newsweek*, January 13, 1975 pp. 34-35 interview with Belgium's Viscount Etienne Davignon, head of the International Energy Commission and Coordinator, of Foreign Policy for the Common Market and Andrew Knight, editor of the *London Economist*. See, also, as an example of growing American acceptance of this thesis a recent column by the usual staid James Reston of the *New York Times* where he writes: "And who are the friends of Israel anyway—those who urge her to give up territory occupied by aggression or those who urge her to hold on to everything she has?" (reviewer's emphasis), *New York Times*, January 31, 1975.

lower the intensity of the Arab stimulus to recover the lost territories. Instead, the Arab world would have vented their energies on the many problems they faced at home and abroad (35, 36). In October 1967, Nasser had second thoughts about the wisdom of a purely negative stand and, if sufficiently pressed, would in all probability have agreed to the demilitarization of the Sinai and a generally worded declaration of non-belligerency. "In the meantime, however, the Israeli position hardened; they asked for full maritime rights in the Suez Canal and they had the support of the Americans in demanding an end to all belligerency" (26). "The basic facts of political life should have induced the Israel government in 1967 to make an all out effort to defuse the conflict, to heal wounds and even to appease. *De-escalation* might not have worked but it was never really tried" (37) (reviewer's emphasis). Prof. Laqueur further suggests that it would have been more fruitful for Israel not to terminate the Jarring talks in 1970 and to have attempted new initiatives upon Sadat's assumption of power.

But was withdrawal without reciprocal benefit, while the Arab posture remained belligerent, an act that Prof. Laqueur or any other serious political analyst would have counselled Israel to do in 1967? Earlier in his book, Prof. Laqueur tells of the American acceptance of a Soviet draft formula during the General Assembly session convened on June 19, 1967. That draft would have required an immediate Israeli withdrawal from all the held territories in exchange for a declaration by all member states of the U.N. in the area that each enjoyed the right to maintain an independent national state of its own and to live in peace and security. "The Israelis", Prof. Laqueur states, "viewed this as virtual American surrender to the Soviet-Arab position, for the formula did not even mention Israel by name. Israel would have been in serious trouble had the Arabs decided to subscribe to this meaningless and non-committal declaration. However, much to the relief of the Israelis and to the dismay of the Russians, the Arabs found this concession much too far reaching and they rejected the resolution" (25). Moreover, it is not equally plausible that a unilaterally arrived at Israeli withdrawal might have been perceived by the Arabs as an act of humiliation rather than magnanimity, thus intensifying rather than diminishing Arab hostility?⁶

Prof. Laqueur's analysis of the "fruitful" period after the war of attrition and Sadat's assumption of power is equally unpersuasive. Israel terminated its participation in the Jarring mission in September of 1970 in response to Egyptian deployment of SAM missiles on the west bank of the Canal. This was in direct violation of the cease-fire agreement reached earlier under the auspices of the Rogers Plan which, incidentally, called for full Israeli withdrawal save for minor border rectifications. Was Israel's reaction unreason-

⁶It has been widely advanced that the immediate goal of the 1973 war was to enable the Arabs to regain their self-respect, to improve both their self-respect, to improve both their self image as well as their image vis-a-vis the world. Indeed, a basic strategem employed by Secretary of State Kissinger in the termination of the 1973 conflict was the need to stop the war on, say a 60%-40% winning basis, rather than a 100%-0% ratio, believing that Arab reacquisition of self respect in its military prowess was essential to the commencement of negotiations. The smashing Israel victory in 1967 coupled with a unilateral withdrawal might well have amounted in Arab eyes to a 100% + defeat. See regarding, the role of shame, revenge, and face-saving in Arab society, H. W. Glidden "The Arab World," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 128:8 (February 1972).

able? Israel resumed its participation in the Jarring mission, making a final break only after "the Jarring Plan encouraged the Egyptians to press demands that even a sympathetic mediator found unrealistic—such as retreat from all occupied territory including the Gaza Strip" (31).

Undoubtedly it is true that Israel could have exercised greater wisdom and initiative in its relations with its neighboring Arab states and especially in dealing with the Palestinian issue. The conclusion of Prof. Laqueur's chain of reasoning goes beyond this to suggest that Israeli intransigence was responsible for the crisis. But Prof. Laqueur hardly touches upon the Arab side. Thus, for example, no mention is made of the period of September and October of 1968 when Egypt rejected an American proposal, accepted by Israel, which supported the total return of Sinai to Egypt providing it be demilitarized and the state of belligerency terminated.⁷

Although Prof. Laqueur, wittingly or not, is engaged in an assessment of responsibility for the 1973 crisis he appears unable to surmount the role of an "in-house" critic of Israel. His displeasure at the rise of ultra-nationalism and the political influence of the religious parties within Israel prior to 1973 causes a loss of perspective. When the Arab states refused to go along with peace initiatives, there may well have been popular governmental relief in Israel guided by the belief that time was on Israel's side. Does this, however, detract from the fact that, were the Arab states seriously interested in a favorable settlement, they had a great many opportunities that *they* might have exploited? It is true that in August of 1973, Israel's policy of "creeping annexation" took a leap forward with governmental acceptance of the "Galilee Paper", permitting increased Israeli settlement and the commencement of private land sales in the territories. But is there a proximate linkage between this event and the Arab attack? In short, was the 1973 war, for Israel, "the price of hubris?"⁸ Or was there in fact little connection between the ascent of nationalist policies within Israel and the Arab resolve to go to war? Laqueur is inconsistent. He later writes: "The decision to attack Israel was taken in Cairo in the Spring of 1973. It was no sudden decision nor the first such resolve. After the immediate shock of the defeat of 1967, Nasser had assumed what had been lost by war could be restored only by war". (44)

Laqueur's inconsistency on this point is indeed unfortunate, for the question remains a fascinating one. Most probably, the ascent of nationalist policies in Israel and the decline of Western and Third World support were directly related in casual fashion. Was this erosion then a factor in Sadat's decision to opt for war? Did he conclude, upon surveying the international climate of opinion, that win or lose on the battlefield, the political victory was his for the gambit? That, given the necessity of choice, the trend of world opinion would now congeal into a pronounced global anti-Israel stance? Or was the decision to war based on internal pressures? External Arab pressure? Soviet influence? Prof. Laqueur's unidimensional treatment of the issue provides us with little new insight here.

⁷See Rostow, *op. cit.*

⁸See for the earliest expression of this school of thought, N. Shephard, "The Price of Hubris" *The New Statesman*, December 1973.

Military Aspects

Prof. Laqueur proceeds to maintain that Israel's views regarding the value of the territories not only made it impossible to achieve a political solution of the conflict but also distorted Israel's strategic thought, creating a "territorial illusion" that adversely affected its defense position in the 1973 War. "The high command had not only permitted the politicians to use pseudo-military arguments for political purposes, it had managed to deceive itself" (96). The Bar-Lev line as a static line of defense was inherently incapable of withstanding a major, well-prepared attack. From the strategic viewpoint, roving patrol units backed by artillery twenty miles back should have been employed. The static line was preferred "mainly due to the political desire to stress the absolute value of the territories as far as the country's defenses were concerned" (99). Here is an example of some of Mr. Laqueur's reasoning: "Before May, 1967, the Egyptian army for practical reasons had been kept in permanent quarters west of the Canal and only small forces were on the border with Israel. Thus, every Egyptian troop movement to the East was a warning sign . . . this advantage no longer existed as a result of the deployment of Israeli forces . . . if this was the case, the basic assumptions of the post-1967 period about greater security for Israel as the result of the acquisition of Sinai-rather than its demilitarization-had been wrong" (100).

Regarding Israeli battle strategy, Laqueur takes the Israeli general staff to task for not "penetrating deeply into Syrian territory, which would have caused Syria's collapse . . . The defeat of the Syrian army, the cutting off of Damascus, and an advance toward Jebel ed Druz would have given Israel several far-reaching consequences. First, it would have removed Syria from the fighting. Second, an advance toward Jebel ed Druz would have opened up positive political possibilities: traditionally many Druze had been favorably disposed toward Israel. Meanwhile, a holding action could have been fought on the Egyptian front which would not have been so difficult to accomplish" (110). Moreover, "energetic action against Syria might have left Israel with enough time to turn against Egypt and to repel the Egyptian forces at least up to the canal" (110). Not having adopted this strategy, Israeli GHQ should have advanced toward Cairo at a more rapid rate and should have been more willing to take risks. Time was of the essence. "For this reason it is not good enough to talk about 'being deprived of the fruits of victory'. Everyone knew in advance that this would happen if the time factor was ignored." Concluding, Laqueur writes that although "(i)t is too early to analyze in detail operations in the two theatres of war, it would appear that the obsession with the 'territorial issue,' which dictated strategic thought prior to the outbreak of war, also bedeviled the conduct of the war . . . the command continued a frontal attack against the Syrians after they had already been thrown back beyond the 1967 armistice lines, as if it were important to make further territorial conquests. The Israeli counterattack at Suez was launched before the Syrians had been totally defeated, as if it were strategically important that the Egyptians were holding a narrow strip of land" (113).

This reviewer can only suggest that Laqueur's characterization of Israeli military planner's preoccupation with Sinai and the Folan as being a "territorial illusion" requires greater amplification if it is to be credible.

Response

A great deal of confusion remains about the 1973 conflagration. The question of whether Sadat seriously expected to obtain from Israel greater concessions through war than through the exercise of the pre-1973 negotiation options remains unanswered. Could the motivating factor have been purely the psychological victory of assuaging the past humiliation with a show of military prowess? If so, were the Arabs' psychic needs exploited by a superpower whose survival and growth in the region is dependent on the maintenance of instability? Certainly if we look at the results the Soviet Union had much to gain: the outflanking of NATO to the South through greater Soviet infiltration in the Mediterranean basin and the cartelization of the industrialized world's oil by forces it might be capable of controlling.

Prof. Laqueur's answers to these questions are that Egypt and Syria "simply wanted to break the deadlock that had lasted for a long time and which had become intolerable" (187). Their plan received Russian approval. Leading Moscow newspapers called on the Arabs to make full use of the oil blockade and also suggested that they withdraw their multi-billion dollar deposits in Western countries (192).

Regarding the current dilemma and the influence of the oil weapon, Laqueur writes that it became clear that whoever ruled the oil fields potentially ruled Europe and Japan. The Soviet Union lost no time in congratulating the Arabs on their use of the oil weapon. In short time, Europe was reduced to the equation, as Laqueur bluntly puts it, of " $9 \times 0 = 0$ " (175).

As of the time of this review, matters have worsened. The danger that one or more of the European nations simply will be unable to pay the sums demanded by the producers for oil "is immediate, within a matter of months".⁹

Already the industrialized nations of Europe are borrowing from the producers to pay for current consumption and are selling them their most sophisticated armaments en masse to preserve cash reserves.¹⁰ If matters go unchecked the OPEC countries policies may in a relatively short time upset the world monetary system.

Do the United States, Western Europe and Japan have no alternative to impassively facing abdication of their political power to the Arab states and its sponsor? Europe has become increasingly more vocal in maintaining that

⁹Farmanfarmaian, Gutowski, Okita, Roose and Wilson, "How Can the World Afford OPEC Oil?" 53 *Foreign Affairs* 207.

¹⁰"Virtually all of the industrialized nations, as well as most of those well along in the developing phase, could be expected to fall within this pattern of requirements (borrowing for consumption) at some time within the next five years. France, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom for example have already arranged individually to borrow from OPEC and other countries, as well as from the commercial banking system." *ibid.*, 216. Optimists may find comfort in the words of Thomas D. Willet, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Research, upon releasing a detailed study on the probable effects of the Arab petro-dollar build up: "that continued oil deficits need not cause a financial collapse of the Western world should not be taken as a rationale for the view that the oil price increases are of little consequence. Short of war the oil price increases if maintained for any number of years will probably cause the greatest misallocation of resources the world has ever seen". *New York Times*, January 31, 1975, pp. 1, 42.

Israel is the cause of their troubles—its intransigence being responsible for the unleashing of the 1973 war and the use of the oil weapon. If only Israel would acquiesce to Arab demands and cease to be a major provocation to the Arabs, oil would creep back to a market level. In this regard, Laqueur commendably points out that the oil war is a struggle with a momentum of its own, quite separate from the Arab-Israeli conflict (252). It may be pursued, he tells us, in a variety of ways as “there are many ways of bringing pressure on the Arab oil producers, such as seizing their financial holdings in the West, but in the last resort only the threat of military action will deter those who have proclaimed their intention to ruin Europe” (251). Laqueur might have added, however, that time is against the West. The prospect of neutralizing the Soviet Union should resort to armed intervention prove necessary, rapidly declines with the increasing weakening of Europe and the strengthening of the Soviet position in the area.¹¹

What Professor Laqueur might have done is to apply his conclusions as to the means of resolving the West's dilemma over oil to a generalized approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. He would then have concluded that international stability in any region of the world cannot long endure without the acceptance and respect of minimal reciprocal rules inhibiting resort to force to solve political problems and that, accordingly, successful foreign policy demands the courage to act on convictions. Egypt and Syria consistently refused to make any serious attempt to negotiate a resolution of the conflict. Israel often stalled. The U.S. should have applied pressure on both parties to negotiate. Instead it deferred an explosive situation. When the Soviet Union mocked the spirit of detente by encouraging Syria and Egypt to attack Israel, the U.S. could have condemned the action, using the not inconsiderable power it possessed. It did not. The concept of adherence of principles of minimal use of force in the conduct of international relations and its corollary, condemnation for violations of this standard, was not only ignored but abandoned.

Prof. Laqueur's achievement in this book is thus mixed. He makes a worthwhile contribution in alerting us to the gravity of the West's current dilemma and its need to realize that the solutions may be painful ones indeed. But Laqueur's techniques of analysis fail him in diagnosing the roots of our problems. His treatment of the causality of the war is discursive and inconsistent. His treatment of the West's response to the initiation of the war lacks an adequate treatment of alternative courses of action. And overall, his work suffers from a unidimensional approach to a multifaceted problem. In the final analysis, Prof. Laqueur's work provides another example of the problem John Locke alluded to when he stated, “it is one thing to show a man that he is in error and another to put him in possession of truth.”

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¹¹See regarding the desirability, prospects and feasibility of American intervention, Tucker, “Oil: the Issue of American Intervention” 59 *Commentary* 21, (January, 1975).