3 Peace through more Military and Arms?

MILITARY ANTAGONISMS AND RACE

Throughout recorded history, the Middle East has been the arena for sweeping military encounters. Enduring geopolitical struggles between the two great river systems – the Nile and the Tigris/Euphrates – date back to the Pharaonic and Babylonian dynasties. As perhaps the world’s most important crossroad, the area has been fought over by Greeks, Romans, Assyrians, Persians, Turks Mongols, Crusaders and, latterly, the imperial powers of nineteenth-century Europe. As Islam spread across this area in the eighth and ninth centuries, it was carried, so to speak, in the saddle-bags of Muslim generals.

The Middle East is still one of the most volatile regions in the world. Since 1945, every state in the area has been involved in at least one war. The core conflict has, inevitably, been the Arab–Israeli struggle (and the related Palestinian problem), which has resulted in three regional wars, two major military actions, and several thousand deaths. Opposition to Israel was, up to 1979 at least, a normative factor of foreign policy for every state in the area. Even after Egypt’s decision to sign a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, this consideration continued to dominate inter-Middle Eastern politics, as was evinced by Egypt’s prolonged exclusion from the Arab League.

The Arab–Israeli conflict was a source of formal concern to all, particularly after the 1967 war when the Golan Heights, Sinai, the West Bank (including Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip were occupied. It was a source of private irritation to many, particularly when the PLO, in effect a coalition of individual Palestinian movements under a fairly unified leadership, threatened the security of states such as Jordan in 1970, and Lebanon in 1975 as the Lebanese civil war began. It was also the ideal excuse for Israel in 1978 and 1982 to attempt to act as a regional superpower by attacking the Lebanese territories.

Accompanying the Arab–Israeli confrontation have been two spectacular and grisly conflicts initiated by Iraq. The first, the Iran–Iraq war, which raged from September 1980 until a cease-fire in the summer of 1988, was...
a conventional conflict, with large regular and irregular armed forces confronting each other with very high levels of fire power and means of destruction, including poison gas. The second was the conflict over Kuwait, which started when the Iraqis invaded the emirate in August 1990, and ended (militarily at least) in March 1991 with the liberation of Kuwait by an allied force.

Alongside these major military confrontations, there has been a constant stream of smaller incidents: brief border skirmishes (Bahrain–Qatar, Egypt–Libya, Egypt–Sudan, Saudi Arabia–Qatar, Saudi Arabia–Yemen, Oman–Ras Al Khaimah, Jordan–Syria, Syria–Iraq; and so on) shows of force (Israel versus all its neighbours); invasions of longer or shorter duration (Turkey in Cyprus, Israel and Syria in Lebanon, Iraq in Iran, and then Iran in Iraq).

This simple listing of military conflicts indicates nothing about their causes and motives, which are complex and specific to each particular theatre or conflict. But what is clear is that many states in the region have interests beyond their immediate territory and physical security. Some have allies and commitments, or definitions of interests (such as 'regional stability' or 'strategic balance') for which they are ultimately ready to fight. These elements have been reinforced by the fact that most regimes in the region have been military or quasi-military. Indeed, Middle Eastern societies have experienced prolonged periods of military government that has been the rule rather than the exception in the region. Even when, de jure, regimes are headed by civilians, it may be the case that the power wielders are military officers who have left their uniforms in the closet.

The long list of military conflicts tells us that the Middle East has had more than its share of military violence and, predictably, has devoted more of its human and material resources to defence and war-making than have many other regions of the developing world. That is also proved by the figures. In 1970, Middle Eastern states spent $6.1 billion (in constant 1985 $) on defence. By 1975, that figure had increased to $21 billion – a growth of 3.4 times in real terms. By 1980, spending on defence amounted to $38.2 billion: this would mean more than six-fold real increase in about ten years. To put these figures in perspective, the total gross national product (GNP) of all Middle Eastern states did not even double in real terms during 1977–80 in spite of massive transfers of oil wealth to some states.

In the 1980s, the Middle East accounted for between 30 and 40 per cent of the world's arms imports. In 1985, military spending amounted to $57.3 billion, rising to $63 billion in 1990 and to an estimated $74 billion