

The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century

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WILLIAM R. POLK

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CONTENTS

Introduction	9
PART ONE	
1. Memories of the Past	15
2. The Rise of Nationalism	29
3. The Struggle for Independence	47
4. The Growth of Capacity	64
PART TWO	
5. The Cold War	85
6. Hot Wars	93
7. American Diplomacy	110
8. Lebanon and Palestine	127
9. Begin and Sadat	138
PART THREE	
10. Potential for the Future	161
11. Conclusion	179
Appendix A. The Camp David Agreement	185
Appendix B: Framework for an Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty	191
Appendix C: Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Arab Republic of Egypt	193
Appendix D: Memorandum of Agreement on Assurances signed by the US Secretary of State Mr Cyrus Vance, and the Israeli Foreign Minister, Mr Moshe Dayan, on 26 March 1979	197
Index	199
Biographical Note	202

For Eliza

**deaf to the sounds of hate
reading the signs of understanding**

INTRODUCTION

In school most of us were taught to view history as a sort of nomadic experience: the eye roves from one area to another as the pages unfold. First there were the ancient Egyptians and the Mesopotamians, then came the Phoenicians who were replaced by the Greeks who were defeated by the Romans who in turn fell before the Huns and so on. School texts rarely encourage the student to consider what happened to the Egyptians while the Greeks were 'becoming'. They were no longer relevant. Like school texts, the contemporary media focuses our attention on fleeting incidents and fosters our mental migrations. Crises, wars and, rarely, peace negotiations seize our attention and hold it briefly, but it is soon diverted to another area where something more arresting or novel is happening.

Like ancient peoples, current issues rarely disappear. Often they remain just as relevant to those involved and return to seize our attention when they again appear newsworthy or again novel. But even when the issues fade or even be resolved and when the stirring events are forgotten, they form patterns which, unseen, stratify the political geology, shaping the contours of the future.

Working from this visible and contemporary ground downward, so to speak, both the historian and the statesman must constantly re-explore the unseen and older strata of memory since what appears today merely of antiquarian interest may tomorrow acquire the most painful relevance. Like the oil hidden under its sands, the Middle East 'yields' contemporary refinements of history which are the very stuff of its politics. Throughout this story, we shall see example after example.

It is primarily as an historian that I have written this book, but I have also observed and participated in many of the events with which it deals over the last thirty years. I have known a number of the major participants and have been allowed access to the confidential thoughts of several of the governments. More important, I have had the opportunity to talk with, live among and read the literature of the various peoples. These experiences contain their own rewards; they were not means to any end, certainly not to this book. But based upon them, I have been able to make accurate predictions and projections on Middle Eastern events — the war of 1967, the war of 1973, the failure of several peace initiatives — and more importantly to devise ways to work

toward peace. Time after time, I have watched an opportunity lost, often through misperceptions of the issues and problems, and I seek here to set out what I think are the essential facts and interpretations to help us seize the peace.

A few words about the structure of the book may help the reader. I begin with the deeper, more distant memories of the Arabs and the Jews, trying to show what I have called the political 'geology' of contemporary events. These, even when not exactly 'remembered', contribute to what I understand Jung to have thought of as the collective unconscious. Put another way, they have helped to make Egyptians, for example, distinctive. Insiders do not need to 'know' them for they acquire the feel of them as they mature; outsiders, lacking the intimate life-long experience, must seek artificially to know them to understand the culture.

Beginning with 'The Coming of Nationalism', the memories become more immediate and more imperative. Every child is taught these events and consequently they form the language, set the style, and give the syllabus of contemporary events. As becomes apparent in the chapter on Begin and Sadat, however much these two gifted and dedicated men may wish otherwise, they see the world and act within this schooling. I have dealt with these issues essentially chronologically but within the sequence I have sought to single out several main themes. The two most important are the struggle for independence — with a clear admission that in our times nationalism is still the strongest and most popular single political idea in the Middle East as it is in Africa and Asia — and the growth of capacity. Capacity is a concept often neglected in political discussion. Economists deal with it more routinely. They often quantify it in terms of Gross National Product (GNP) or, to refine it in human terms, GNP *per capita*. So we can compare Israel and Egypt, for example, as countries with GNPs of roughly \$12 thousand million versus roughly \$14 thousand million. Or when divided by the populations of each roughly \$3,370 versus \$350 *per capita*. Other figures crowd forward. Israel has a population of roughly 3½ million and Egypt 40 million; Israel has a land area of 8,000 square miles and Egypt of 386,000 square miles, but to use the geographical equivalent of 'per capita' roughly 40 per cent of Israel's land is urban or waste compared to about 98 per cent of Egypt's. Effectively Egypt is a land of only 10,000 square miles. My question is essentially how to make sense of these and other concepts in analysing both the relative power and capacity of the various countries and their performance today compared with the past. A different aspect of this change, with projections

for the future and some discussion of the 'interface' of the Middle East and the world financial community comes in Chapter 10, 'Potential for the Future'. There I also try to show the problems which have arisen within both Israel and the Arab countries as a consequence of rapid development.

Finally, and to me most important, I suggest that the normal avenues of diplomacy are not only limited but also misleading. Misleading in one crucial aspect: diplomacy normally occurs between states. This has been the experience of Western Europe since the Renaissance and that experience has become the world norm. But the final, unresolved issue of Middle Eastern peace is not between the states. It is the fate of a non-state: the now roughly 3 million displaced Palestinian Arabs. In the spectacular events of 1978 they were not present or represented. So, while giving due credit to the statesmen and their states, I lay particular emphasis on this issue. The Palestinian Arabs are the 'Jews' of the modern Middle East. Their exodus and diaspora, although more recent and of shorter duration, is a tragedy comparable to that of the Jews. And without losing any sympathy for the tragic history of the Jews, one can also understand and sympathise with the Palestinians. While certainly not approving of all of their actions, I attempt to show how and why they have come to feel and act as they have and why such issues as Lebanon are today intertwined with their fate. I conclude that no real peace is possible which does not comprehend them.

Books on the Middle East suffer from the passions of both writers and readers. I have written as I see the events. For that I make no apology. But here I end with the observation that all the peoples of the Middle East deserve admiration and sympathy: sympathy for the much that they have suffered and admiration for the ways in which they have accepted the great challenges this century has brought them. In focusing on the tasks of the present, it is easy to forget the much that has been done. From this they and we can draw courage. The history of the Middle East is not just crises and wars, but also the growth and struggle of the human spirit. This also I have tried to include.

William R. Polk
Lagonisi, Greece

PART ONE

1 MEMORIES OF THE PAST

More than most peoples, Middle Easterners look back over their shoulders before taking each step forward. Probably no place in the world is more conducive to persistent and vivid memories. Everywhere symbols and artifacts of the past are to be found. Whether the Egyptian ploughs his field or catches a bus to a factory, he does so under the shadow of the pyramids; many Iraqis live atop what are virtually slow growing pyramids, the mounds formed from thousands of years of urban rubble; and Jews, Christians and Muslims find Jerusalem to be both a city and a living museum. Even where there are no giant monuments, one is constantly reminded of tradition by the clothes, the jewellery, the customs and the mores of neighbours. In language, above all, time and man and experience are distilled into something which seems to transcend the individual and the present and link them with forebearers time out of mind of this generation.

And the area is not discrete: its symbols affect outsiders — as Jerusalem and Mecca particularly do, so that the Middle East becomes a focal point for larger communities. Islam is encoded in Arabic and sprang from an Arabian environment so that today Mecca is the target of prayer of the whole Islamic community of which only a small fraction is Arab. In even more complex ways, Israel affects the scattered Jewish communities of the world who since the migrations nearly 2,000 years ago have dreamed of 'tomorrow in Jerusalem'. Of these things everyone is aware but what is even more important for those who live in the Middle East, outside events and memories have altered their lives. Probably no recent events have been seared into any people more painfully than the European holocaust into the Jewish community, and the memories of European imperialism still haunt the Arab political mind.

Of other peoples, it has been truly said that those who neglect the past are doomed to repeat it; of Middle Easterners it must be said that the past is sought out, sometimes to be repeated indeed, but sought out and used for every contemporary purpose. As a matter of policy each state mines the past so that memories are renewed, reinforced, woven into the present in school texts, cinemas, radio and television programmes, folk drama and dance, in street names, in mass ceremonies and national and religious celebrations. And where the state falters or fails, the people do the job themselves. No statesman can

afford to view any issue purely in its contemporary guise or on the basis of its contemporary merits; rather he must approach it within the collective memory of his people. If he is a genuine leader, he can hardly do otherwise. But genuine or not, if he is to lead and stay in office, he must cherish and respect the tender nerve of memory. Let us begin to analyse these memories as Middle Easterners themselves do with religion.

The Islamic Tradition

Most of the people in the Middle East today are Muslims, adherents of the religion of Islam, which was revealed by the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century. While proclaimed in Arabic for the Arabs, Islam is closely related to Judaism and Christianity in emphasising the unity of God and upholding a similar code of conduct and in revering most of the same prophets. But, in important ways, Islam differs. More than a faith, it is a way of life with exact rules of conduct governing everything from customs of childbirth to circumcision to marriage to funerals to division of inheritance — from before the cradle to after the grave. Indeed, Islam is not only a set of rules for the game of life but a detailed training programme on how to play it. Even among those who do not practise all of its ceremonies or accept all of its tenets (and they are today in the vast majority), the religion, like a dye, has permeated their lives. It colours the minutiae of daily experience, so completely that no conversation, even between illiterate men, occurs without the invocation of more theologically oriented terminology than would be heard in the course of weeks in a western divinity school.

Moreover, Islam even as it is understood today has become confused with the memory of a more glorious past in which Muslim Arabs were in the vanguard of civilisation and ruled an empire stretching from the frontier of China to the Atlantic. For Muslim school children today, the life of the Prophet Mohammed who died in AD 632 is more vivid and more contemporary than that of their grandfathers, living statesmen or even cinema stars. It is really the memory of the stirring times of early Islam that may be said to link the peoples of the Middle East. Even Christians, and until recently also Jews, found in Islamic-Arabic civilisation, if not in the religion itself, a matrix in which their lives took shape.

Islam is today the religion of about 500 million people. Of these only about one in seven or eight lives in the Middle East, but each year upwards of three million make the pilgrimage to Mecca from Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Balkans. Flowing back