



---

## HISTORICAL VIEW

In the last half century, the Arab-Israeli conflict has led the Middle East into six major wars and has cost thousands of lives. It has also left the Palestinian people stateless and dispersed, creating frustration and anger that exacerbate regional tension. Moreover, this conflict has diverted billions of dollars from productive investments to the purchase of armaments and has blocked regional cooperation for economic development that would have permitted a more rational and effective use of national resources (Granham & Tessler, 1995, xiv). The world remains concerned about the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict, with finding a solution, and with helping peace prevail in the Middle East.

### WHAT IS THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT?

The Arab-Israeli conflict and the Middle East conflict are two sides of one coin used to describe the regional dispute between the Arab states and Israel. The conflict, which started with the establishment of the state of Israel, has been one of the longest and seemingly unresolvable conflicts of this century. In 1948, Walter Lippmann, the dean of American pundits, declared: “Among the really difficult problems of the world, the Arab-Israeli conflict is one of the simplest and most manageable” (Webster, 2001). Not exactly as it turned out. More than half a century later, we are witnessing a fresh eruption of diplomacy

Copyright © 2002. Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated. All rights reserved.

around what has become the bitterest, most intractable, and most destabilizing problem of world politics.

“To Jews and Judaism, the establishment of Israel is the pivotal event of the past 2,000 years of Jewish history. To Islam and to Muslims, the existence of a Jewish state in the midst of the Muslim world is perhaps the greatest challenge it has faced in its history” (Bickerton & Klausner, 1998, 1). Throughout their long conflict, both the Arabs and the Israelis have tried to legitimize their positions by seeking to set favorable political and cultural images and symbols of themselves, and unfavorable ones of their opponents. “The tragedy of the Arab-Israeli conflict is that it is the collision over the same land of two sets of historic and moral rights of groups who are both victims of each other’s violence” (3).

## A BACKGROUND OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

In the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, the British government informed the Zionist movement that it favored the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. “By offering to help the Zionists establish this home, Britain could place its own troops in Palestine and thereby control that strategic prize near the Suez Canal as well as preside over the holy places in Jerusalem” (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 8).

During the 1920s and 1930s, Jewish and Palestinian nationalists, each seeking statehood in the same territory, struggled against each other. Arabs could not stem Jewish immigration, which became increasingly urgent once Adolph Hitler and the Nazis seized power in Germany in 1933. Arab governments became concerned about the Palestine problem, and they articulated their grievances in meetings with the British government in 1937–1939.

World War II led to a groundswell of support in the United States and Europe for a Jewish state, as a result of the shock of the near annihilation of European Jews by the Nazis. Zionists hardened their political position, insisting that the Jewish state must encompass all of Palestine. In 1946, the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry recommended that one hundred thousand Holocaust survivors settle in Palestine. The Committee of Inquiry also proposed that Palestine become a joint Jewish-Arab state. By then, however, the Arab and Jewish communities were each determined to create their own state.

The U.N. General Assembly Resolution 181 of November 1947 endorsed a plan to establish separate Jewish and Arab states. At that time, Palestine’s Jewish community totaled 30 percent of the population and owned seven percent of the land. However, the partition plan allotted 55 percent of the land to the Jewish state. Jerusalem and its environs, some five percent of Palestine’s area, would form an international enclave under U.N. control. The Arab state would comprise 40 percent of Palestine’s land. Palestinians and the Arab states rejected that partition plan, insisting that Palestine gain full independence as

an Arab state. The Zionist leadership, however, accepted the partition plan as “the indispensable minimum.”

## THE FOUNDATION OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

As the United Nations was reexamining the “Question of Palestine,” Zionist planners were busy establishing their authority on the land of Palestine. As Chaim Weizmann, the president of the World Zionist Organization, reminisced, “Our only chance now . . . was to create facts, to confront the world with these facts, and to build on their foundation. . . . While the United Nations was debating trusteeship, the Jewish State was coming into being” (quoted in Nassar, 1997, 79).

The manner in which the Jewish state “was coming into being” was not peaceful, rather, it was characterized by “violence and bloodshed.” The most violent incident that led to a massive exodus of the Palestinian Arab inhabitants and opened the door for the creation of the Jewish state was the massacre of Deir Yassin. On April 9, 1948, 254 men, women, and children in the village of Deir Yassin were massacred by a militant Zionist group named Irgun led by Menachem Begin, who became Israel’s prime minister in 1977. Begin later justified the massacre in these terms: “The massacre was not only justified, but there would not have been a state of Israel without the victory at Deir Yassin” (quoted in Nassar, 1997, 79).

In his memoirs about the Deir Yassin incident, Edward Said (2000), a renowned Palestinian American scholar, said: “More than any single occurrence in my memory of that difficult period it was Deir Yassin that stood out in all its awful and intentional fearsomeness—the stories of rape, of children with their throats slit, mothers disemboweled, and the like. They gripped the imagination, as they were designed to do, and they impressed a young boy many miles away with the mystery of such bloodthirsty and seemingly gratuitous violence against Palestinians whose only crime seemed to be that they were there” (157).

Israel proclaimed its independence on May 15, 1948, just as the last British troops departed. By then the Jewish army had seized most of the territory allotted to the Jewish state and captured major Palestinian towns. So, Israel was created as a Jewish homeland almost three years after the end of World War II and the Nazi Holocaust that killed six million Jews in Europe. For the Jewish people, the significance of that piece of Middle Eastern land bordering the Mediterranean went back millennia, to biblical times. The founding of Israel was, for them, a return home after 2,000 years in exile (Cantor, 1998).

Prior to the establishment of Israel, volunteers and donations (aside from diplomatic moves) characterized Arab involvement. But it was not until after the declaration of Israel and the mass exodus of Palestinians to neighboring Arab countries that the Arab armies entered Palestine. On the same day that Israel was born, Egypt and other Arab countries, such as Syria and Jordan, de-

cided to defend the Palestinians, but their forces were ill-prepared for combat. The fighting lasted from May through December 1948, after which agreements between the warring parties left Israel in control of three-quarters of Palestine. Jordan took control of the remaining part of Palestine, including the old city of Jerusalem, with the exception of the Gaza district which went to Egyptian control.

In the Palestinian Arabs' memories, "1948 stands as the year of *al-nakba* (the tragedy). Ever since, the notion of the return to the homeland became a Palestinian obsession" (Nassar, 1997, 79).

Israel used its victory to consolidate its hold territorially and politically. As Jews migrated to Israel from Europe and the Middle East, Israel's Jewish population doubled from 650,000 in 1948 to 1.3 million in 1952. The United Nations admitted Israel as a member in 1949, with the condition that it compensate Palestinian refugees and internationalize Jerusalem. Less than a year later, Israel defied those terms by proclaiming West Jerusalem its capital.

## THE 1956 WAR

During the early 1950s, Palestinian intellectuals believed that the remedy for their plight rested on Arab unity. To bring about unity, many Palestinians felt that the first step would be to change the traditional leadership, whom they felt had betrayed their cause. Most Palestinians hailed the overthrow of King Farouk of Egypt in 1952 and became the strongest supporters of Egypt's revolutionary leader Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Nasser, who came to power in Egypt after a military coup that put an end to the monarchy, championed the cause of Arab unity. It is noteworthy that Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion publicly welcomed the 1952 coup in Egypt and extended an offer of peace to Nasser. Secret negotiations did in fact ensue, but Nasser's regime in 1953 made it clear to the Israelis that Egypt preferred to maintain the status quo of "no war, no peace" (Mufti, 2000, 72).

Nasser did not believe that he had much to gain from a peace accord with Israel, and he was afraid to lose the Arab public opinion, an important element in Egypt's regional ambitions at the time. Therefore, the result was a steadily escalating level of tension between 1953 and 1956, driven by Israeli insecurity and further exacerbated by Arab border infiltrations.

A major factor that affected the situation in the Middle East during that time was the way in which both the United States and the Soviet Union were preoccupied in such a manner as to limit their freedom of action. The United States was in the throes of a presidential election, during which it was assumed that President Dwight Eisenhower would not make any vital international decision that might prejudice his chances of reelection. Similarly, the Soviet Union was busy quelling the national urge for liberalization that had begun to be expressed in Poland and Hungary.

However, the Cold War still intruded into Middle East politics when the United States tried to get Arab countries to join an anti-Soviet military alliance that included the non-Arab Moslem countries of Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. The pro-British government of Iraq joined the alliance in April 1955, which was then named the Baghdad Pact.

Israel became concerned about American cooperation with the Arabs and was also concerned about Egypt's refusal to allow Israeli ships to pass through the Suez Canal. Although Egypt searched only three of 267 vessels that entered the canal from 1951 to 1955, Israel feared its vulnerability to a blockade and stressed that it would go to war if its access were denied.

In September 1955, President Nasser turned to the Soviet Union to negotiate an arms deal after the United States and the West European governments refused to sell him arms. The Egyptian-Soviet arms deal angered and frightened the United States because it enabled Moscow to gain influence in the heart of the Arab world. The United States also became angry when Egypt extended diplomatic recognition to the Communist Chinese government in May 1956 (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998).

On July 26, 1956, Nasser nationalized the administration of the Suez Canal, which had opened in 1869 under international management. Nationalization helped provide revenue for Egypt to construct the Aswan High Dam, which the United States, Britain, and the World Bank had refused to fund. The United States recognized Nasser's right to nationalize the Suez Canal Company so long as Egypt compensated the stockholders. However, Britain and France, who were the major shareholders in the company, were determined to regain control of the canal. Britain denounced Nasser as "a new Hitler, who would dominate the Middle East if appeased" (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 16).

Britain and France assembled naval and air forces in the eastern Mediterranean to invade Egypt. Israel shared the British and French desire to overthrow Nasser. The canal crisis provided an opportunity for Israel to seize the Gaza Strip, gain control of the Sinai coast along the Gulf of Aqaba, try to force Egypt to sign a peace treaty, and perhaps cause Nasser's fall from power. Leaders of Britain, France, and Israel secretly met in Paris on October 16, 1956, and invented an elaborate cover story to disguise their plans.

On October 30, 1956, Israel attacked Egypt with the stated purpose of stopping guerrilla raids from Gaza and opening the Gulf of Aqaba and the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping. One day after the start of the Israeli invasion, Britain and France issued an ultimatum to both Israel and Egypt to withdraw from the canal, which would have left Israeli forces in control of the Sinai. They also demanded that Nasser accept a temporary Anglo-French occupation of the canal to protect international shipping. When Nasser, as expected, rejected the ultimatum, Britain and France announced a joint expedition to seize the Suez Canal, and they attacked Egypt (Andersen, Seibert, & Wagner, 1998, 115).

Britain and France hoped that the United States would support the attack because the American public generally sympathized with Israel, and Washington was preoccupied with the Soviet crackdown on Hungary as well as its presidential election. However, President Eisenhower sternly opposed the invasion of Egypt, viewing it as “a throwback to colonial-era gunboat diplomacy” (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 17).

Both the United States and the Soviet Union supported United Nations resolutions that condemned the three countries’ attack on Egypt, called for an immediate cease-fire, and demanded their withdrawal. The United States encouraged the establishment of a U.N. Emergency Force (UNEF) to police the Israeli-Egypt border. UNEF was stationed in the Gaza Strip and at the southern end of the Gulf of Aqaba. UNEF prevented Palestinian raids into Israel and ensured that Israeli shipping could pass through the gulf. But Israel did not gain the use of the Suez Canal, and its political conflict with Egypt festered.

On November 1, 1956, the United Nations adopted a U.S.–sponsored resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire, a withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Suez zone, and the reopening of the Suez Canal which was closed by Egypt before the invasion. The resolution also asked Britain and France to “refrain from introducing military goods into the area” (Diller, 1994, 24).

After the 1956 war, Arabs and Israelis made no progress toward resolving their conflict, for they disagreed on how to negotiate: Arabs wanted indirect negotiations under U.N. auspices; Israel insisted on direct talks. They also disagreed on negotiating priorities. Arabs viewed the Palestinian refugee problem as key: The refugees’ status must be resolved before Arabs would recognize Israel and agree on borders. On the other hand, recognition was Israel’s top priority: Only after achieving diplomatic recognition would Israel discuss the refugees. Even then, Israel would not consider allowing refugees to return to their pre-1948 homes. Israelis hoped that over time, refugees would assimilate into surrounding countries. Instead, the refugee problem continued, and the armistice lines remained unstable (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998).

Following the 1956 war, the Soviet influence increased markedly in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Moscow became the major arms supplier and a significant trading partner for those states. Eisenhower’s support for Egypt during the Suez crisis encouraged Arab nationalists, but U.S. preoccupation with the Cold War dampened that support because Arab regimes were more concerned about Israel than about potential Communist threats. In the aftermath of the 1956 war, the Arab-Israeli conflict took a backseat to intra-Arab tensions in Middle East politics, as Nasser, whose political prestige had risen in the Arab world following the conflict, sought to extend Egyptian influence over the rest of the Arab world.

[During the decade following the 1956 war,] Arab politicians were preoccupied with their search for political identity. Under the banner of pan-Arabism, politicians in Egypt and Syria attempted to achieve political

unity by forming the United Arab Republic, which lasted only from February 1958 to September 1961 because Syrians resented their junior role in the union. During those years, Arab rulers avoided confrontation with Israel, but tension along the armistice lines separating Israel, Syria, and Jordan occasionally created new crises (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998).

## THE FOUNDATION OF THE PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION

During the 1950s, Palestinians were attracted to various forms of pan-Arabism that asserted that regaining Palestine required Arab political and military unity. But the idea of Arab unity received a blow in 1961 when Syria ended its union with Egypt. Moreover, “the sense of being discriminated against by fellow Arabs and disappointment with Arab regimes led many Palestinians to stop being passive. They sought to transform their situation through their own actions, rather than wait for Arab governments to rescue them” (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 74).

Small underground guerrilla cells sprang up in the early 1960s. Fatah, the main Palestinian faction founded in Kuwait in 1959 by Yasser Arafat, launched its first raid into Israel in 1965.

The growing discontent among Palestinians worried Arab governments, who sought to channel that alienation by forming the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964. Egypt appointed the PLO leaders, who convened the first Palestine National Council (PNC) in East Jerusalem in May 1964. The equivalent of a parliament-in-exile, the PNC adopted an uncompromising political charter that refused to accept Israel’s existence and called for the destruction of the state of Israel and a return to the situation as it was before 1948.

After the Arabs’ defeat in the 1967 war (to be discussed in the next section), the PNC amended the charter to reflect the new situation. The amendments emphasized popular armed struggle, rejected Zionism and the partition of Palestine, termed Judaism “a religion . . . not an independent nationality, and called for the total liberation of Palestine” (Article 20; cited in Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 75). The PNC charter upheld Arab unity, but emphasized that just as the PLO would “not interfere in the internal affairs of any Arab state” (Article 27; cited in Lesch & Tschirgi, 75), “it rejected control by Arab regimes” (Article 28; cited in Lesch & Tschirgi, 75). The charter could only be amended by a two-thirds vote of the more than four hundred members of the PNC.

## THE 1967 WAR

From 1948 to 1966, the Arab-Israeli conflict could be described as an interstate conflict, however, the 1967 war changed it into a regional dispute. The

Israeli occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 war added new elements to the conflict and marked the beginning of an extensive conflict in the Middle East region (Battah & Lukacs, 1988).

In mid-August 1966, the Palestinians launched attacks against Israel from the Jordanian and Syrian borders, leading to a major clash between Israel and Syria. In the meantime, Egypt strengthened its military forces on the borders with Israel to back Syria against an expected Israeli attack. Moreover, President Nasser, weakened domestically by economic hardship and popular discontent and alarmed by the American tilt toward Israel, marched some troops into the Sinai on May 14, 1967, and he closed the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli vessels or any vessels carrying goods to Israel.

Nasser was hoping to score a propaganda victory without actually going to war. He apparently calculated that the Americans would restrain Israel as they had in 1956 and that he would thereby emerge as a hero to the Egyptian and Arab masses once again. This interpretation was supported by Yitzhak Rabin, chief of staff of the Israeli forces at the time, who told *Le Monde* in 1968, "I do not believe that Nasser wanted war. The two divisions he sent into the Sinai on May 14 would not have been enough to unleash an offensive against Israel. He knew it, and we knew it" (quoted in Mufti, 2000, 80). It was also supported by Menachem Begin, who said in a speech in 1982, "In June 1967, we again had a choice. The Egyptian Army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him" (quoted in Mufti, 2000, 80).

On May 30, 1967, King Hussein of Jordan arrived in Cairo, Egypt, and signed a defense agreement that put his armed forces under Egyptian command. By early June, after the creation of a war cabinet in Israel, Nasser called on the United States to mediate, dispatching his vice president to Washington on June 4, 1967. The next day the Six-Day War broke out during which Israeli planes destroyed most of Egypt's air force on the ground. After the initial Israeli air strike, Israeli ground troops defeated the Egyptian army, seizing the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. That day, most of Egypt's approximately four hundred aircraft were either destroyed or so severely hit that they were put out of action indefinitely. Israeli aircraft also bombed Syrian airfields in the Golan Heights, taking a toll of at least 50 Syrian aircraft. On June 7, the Israelis captured Old Jerusalem, with its fifty thousand Moslem citizens and ten thousand Jordanian troops.

During the first two days of the war, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin had been exchanging messages, leading to an agreement by both sides to press for the U.N. cease-fire. The U.N. Security Council convened in New York on June 5, only a few hours after the Israelis had struck the first blow, but the delegates could not agree on the terms of a cease-fire. The Soviets wanted the fighting to stop, with all sides returning to their positions before the first Israeli attack. The United States, however,

called for a simple cease-fire, which was the Israeli position because it permitted the Jewish state to retain its territorial gains. Then the Soviets complicated the matter by demanding a resolution condemning Israel for starting the war, which was opposed by most of the delegates (Hohenberg, 1998).

On June 23, 1967, President Johnson and Premier Kosygin had a summit meeting at Glassboro State College in New Jersey, but there still was no way of settling the tensions in the Middle East. The Glassboro summit resulted only in an urgent plea for a treaty on arms control between the two great adversaries, the United States and the Soviet Union.

At the beginning of July 1967, the U.N. Security Council was in session on the Middle East conflict. "The Soviet Union called an emergency session of the Security Council's General Assembly under the 1950 'Uniting for Peace' resolution that allowed two thirds of the General Assembly membership to agree to become involved in a crisis which the Security Council had been unable to solve. In the 1967 War, Israel took control over the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights, all of which became known under international law as 'the occupied territories of Israel' " (Donahue & Prosser, 1997, 247). The Arabs' refusal to change their aggressive stance toward Israel, even after the damage that had been inflicted on them, served to delay for some time any agreement between the Soviets and the Americans to reduce tensions.

Even though the Arab League opposed negotiations and peace at its summit conference in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, in September 1967, it approved the use of diplomacy to achieve tangible results. The diplomatic solution to the 1967 hostilities was U.N. Resolution 242, "a masterpiece of diplomatic ambiguity that became the key document in all attempts to arrive at a peaceful solution to the conflict. . . . The Resolution proposed the idea of peace in return for territory—without specifying which should come first" (Bickerton & Klausner, 1998, 155).

The resolution, which was passed on November 22, 1967, did not demand withdrawal from all the territories; rather, it recognized that negotiated boundaries must be "secure." In return, the Arab states should end their state of belligerency with Israel and recognize Israel's right to live in peace. The resolution also called for freedom of navigation through international waterways, which meant the Gulf of Aqaba and the Suez Canal, and a "just settlement" to the refugee problem. In that context, Palestinians were merely refugees, not a nation. "The resolution did not specify the content of a 'just settlement' of the refugee problem" (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 22). The regional Middle East governments continue to debate the meaning of the resolution and differ as to whether it is merely a declaration of principles or a blueprint for a peace settlement.

Israel's victory in 1967 created a new map of the Middle East, with Israel three times larger than it had been in 1949. The Arabs' swift defeat destroyed Nasser's credibility as the preeminent Arab leader and undermined the Syrian

regime's claim to be the Arab world's radical savior. Egypt faced economic collapse when it lost revenue from oil wells in the Sinai and from the Suez Canal. King Hussein's credibility was also destroyed because he lost the holy sites of Jerusalem and failed to protect the Palestinians on the West Bank.

Israelis reacted with amazement, jubilation, and relief to their victory. After feeling besieged by the Arab armies, they now seemed to have won space and security. Many Israelis flooded East Jerusalem to visit the holy places. "For Israel, a new image of strength and power replaced the previous one of the threatened underdog, the gallant little country surrounded by enemies who wished to exterminate it. Israel's victory had a profound effect on Jews, engendering self-confidence, pride, and assertiveness" (Bickerton & Klausner, 1998, 153).

In an interview with a *New York Times* correspondent after the 1967 war, one of Israel's preeminent diplomats said, "Although the Six Day War was a tremendous military salvation and political gain, and enabled us to get the peace with Egypt, we went a little bit crazy intellectually as a result of it. We interpreted the war . . . as a kind of providential messianic event that changed history permanently and gave Israel the power to dictate the future. . . . The reality was quite different. The Arab world remained intact, with the power of refusal largely untouched" (Brown, 1988, 145).

Before the 1967 war between Egypt and Israel, the Arabs opposed the very existence of Israel in the Middle East. However, "the 1967 War marked the beginning of a shift in the conflict's essence: from the issue of Israel's legitimacy to the question of its boundaries. In other words, the conflict began to turn away from 'paradigmatic,' that is cultural, religious, and ideological, to a 'normal' political—and thus more manageable—dispute" (Sela, 1998, 28).

The 1967 war brought about a reawakening among the Palestinians. The Arabs, they learned, were unable to bring about their "Return." The speedy and devastating defeat of the combined forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan left most Palestinians in shock. "During the earlier phase, Palestinian political culture was characterized by its emphasis on the lost homeland and the dream of 'Return.' It was alienation from the homeland that gave the Palestinians their most powerful common cultural bond. Now, after the defeat of 1967, Palestinians began to combine their longing for the 'Return' with emphasis on the maintenance of their identity. Thus, Palestinian nationalism began to replace the traditional Arab nationalism which had dominated Palestinian political culture prior to 1967" (Nassar, 1997, 82).

The regional tension in the Middle East was exacerbated by the Cold War. During the fighting in 1967, Egypt and Syria broke diplomatic relations with the United States. The Soviets broke diplomatic relations with Israel. Because each superpower had its client states, Cold War polarization complicated efforts to foster diplomacy.

## SECRET NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND JORDAN

When King Hussein of Jordan lost control over the West Bank and East Jerusalem to Israel in June 1967, he initially accommodated the Palestinians by allowing the PLO to operate from Jordanian soil. He also took advantage of the cover provided by Nasser and accepted Resolution 242. Moreover, King Hussein removed a major source of tension by cracking down in September 1970 on the PLO guerrillas, who had provoked Israeli retaliatory strikes with their cross-border infiltrations during the previous two years.

Toward the end of 1970, Golda Meir, the then Israeli prime minister, seemed confident that an agreement could be reached with Jordan. The presumption among Meir's advisers was that Hussein was ready to grasp the opportunity for a peaceful settlement if granted decent terms. What the Meir government secretly offered Hussein was a plan in which Jordan would be given a narrow corridor of land leading from Amman to other Arab areas on the West Bank of Jordan, plus a few other minor considerations. However, Hussein refused, and he demanded Israel's removal from his occupied territories including the Old City of Jerusalem. He said this was the only solution that would make him agree to sign a peace treaty as the first major Arab leader to do so and thereby accept Israel as a regional partner. "So, the opportunity passed and Hussein returned . . . to the all-or-nothing Arab fold" (Hohenberg, 1998, 109).

## THE 1973 WAR

The period from 1969 to 1973 witnessed a prolonged "war of attrition" between Egypt and Israel. Egypt was hoping that "a campaign of artillery bombardments and commando raids would produce a steady trickle of Israeli casualties, thereby eroding Israel's triumphalist mood and forcing it into a more accommodating stance" (Mufti, 2000, 83).

The full implications of Anwar Sadat's inauguration as president of Egypt after the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in September 1970 were not at first fully understood. Unlike his predecessor, Sadat saw a certain amount of merit in negotiating for peace with Israel. He was determined to end the Arab-Israeli conflict, which had drained Egypt's resources for almost three decades.

In February 1971, Sadat offered partial peace in return for a partial Israeli pullback in the Sinai, which would have allowed the Suez Canal to reopen. Israel rejected that partial withdrawal, which made Sadat realize that the Jewish state would not respond so long as the Arabs lacked both military credibility and U.S. diplomatic support. Therefore, he expelled Egypt's Soviet military advisers in 1972 to enlist Washington's mediation. Sadat also sent a special envoy to Washington in February 1973 to repeat the offer of partial peace in return for partial withdrawal.

In the early summer of 1973, having explored a half dozen other methods, Sadat determined that he had no alternative but to go to war. “Sadat’s decision to wage war in 1973 was a desperate act aimed at accomplishing what his diplomatic campaign of the previous two years had failed to do—to force Israel and the United States to the negotiating table by jolting them out of their complacency. His war plan reflected this limited objective: crossing the Suez Canal and overwhelming Israel’s fortifications; penetrating at most five or six miles into Sinai; then digging in and resisting counterattacks until—he hoped—the superpowers worked out a cease-fire” (Mufti, 2000, 85).

On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in what the Israelis call the Yom Kippur War. This is because the war started on the Jewish Day of Atonement. In this war, the Egyptian troops succeeded in crossing the Suez Canal and demolishing the Bar-Lev Line, which was established by the Israelis on the East side of the Canal. Syria initially seized most of the Golan Heights, but Israeli troops then pushed the Syrian forces east toward the Syrian capital of Damascus.

During the 1973 war, the Egyptian troopers made use of the missiles imported from Soviet sources. On the other hand, the United States engaged in a massive effort to provide Israel with military supplies.

The main objective of the 1973 war was not to recapture all of Egypt’s lost territory, but to change the political environment. The limited purposes of the war were to restore Arab honor by erasing the humiliation of the 1967 defeat so that Egypt could negotiate with Israel from a position of dignity, and to get the superpowers more actively involved in the negotiating process. Sadat succeeded on both counts. The 1973 War resulted in an emotional and psychological shock in Israel, where there was severe public criticism of Israel’s overconfidence that had prevented accurate intelligence assessments.

Two new elements entered into the 1973 war. First, oil was used as a diplomatic weapon by the Arab states. Second, the United States and the Soviet Union, frightened by their near confrontation during the crisis, cooperated to bring the war to an end.

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), formed in 1960, had gained influence internationally by the 1970s. Moreover, its Arab members sought to coordinate their policies within OPEC. During the October War, Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Arab countries instituted a 25 percent cutback in oil production and increased the posted price of oil by 50 percent. They also refused to sell oil to the United States and other countries, such as The Netherlands and Portugal, that armed Israel or allowed U.S. supply planes to refuel in their airports on the way to Israel. Those measures were instituted within hours of the U.S. dispatch of arms to Israel. “Production cutbacks, price increases, and embargoes led to long lines at gas stations in the West and increased the pressure on the United States and Europe to resolve the crisis diplomatically” (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 26).

The United States and the Soviet Union reached a common understanding that resulted in U.N. Security Council Resolution 338 on October 22, 1973, which called for a cease-fire and immediate negotiations among the concerned parties to implement Resolution 242 in all its parts. Egypt, Israel, and Syria accepted the resolution (Bickerton & Klausner, 1998, 179). The 1973 war set the stage for the peace process of the late 1970s.

## STEPS TOWARD PEACE

The Palestinian issue and the liberation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which were occupied by Israel in 1967, are the “core issues” that have been topping the agenda of all regional and international summit conferences held to try to solve the conflict peacefully.

Currently, the conflict is crystallized in the abandonment of the diplomatic option by the Arab and Israeli sides and the refusal of some Arab states to “normalize” their relationships with Israel.

## ISRAELI-EGYPTIAN PEACE TREATY

Among the Arab countries, Egypt plays a pivotal role in the negotiations for solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Besides its political, ideological, and military weight in the Middle East region, Egypt has entered wars against Israel in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. Moreover, Egypt’s separate peace treaty with Israel in 1979 marked the beginning of bilateral talks between Israel and an Arab country (Sela, 1998, 29).

“Sadat’s success in demonstrating the bankruptcy of the 1967–73 status quo led to Israel and American reassessments. Since it was now clear that ignoring Egypt altogether was not a cost-free policy, the Israelis—particularly after the ascension of Yitzhak Rabin to the prime ministership in April 1974—reverted to their earlier strategy of trying to reach a separate peace with it” (Mufti, 2000, 86).

The 1973 war was a turning point because it made it possible to think about negotiations and peace and created opportunities for effective diplomatic action. Much credit is due the U.S. Secretary of State of that period, Henry Kissinger, for the way he managed American power. He made it clear that the United States would give massive aid to prevent Israel’s defeat, but he also managed the ending of the war, satisfying some Arab claims and bringing the Russians into the process.

As a result of Kissinger’s diplomatic efforts during 1974–1975, there were three important Arab-Israeli agreements, two with Egypt and one with Syria. The Sinai I agreement of January 18, 1974, resulted in Israel’s withdrawal from the west side of the Suez Canal and the establishment of a new armistice line 20 miles east of the canal. As payoffs to the United States, Egypt restored diplomatic relations with Washington, and Saudi Arabia lifted the oil embargo

in March 1974. The Golan accord of May 31, 1974, resulted in Israel's withdrawal from the land captured from Syria in the October War and from the city of Qunaitra, which Israel had occupied in 1967. As a result, the United States and Syria restored diplomatic relations. The Sinai II agreement of September 1, 1975, yielded further Israeli pullbacks east of the mountain passes in the Sinai and from the oil fields in the Gulf of Suez (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998).

In a secret annex between the United States and Israel, the United States pledged to neither recognize nor negotiate with the PLO as long as the PLO did not recognize Israel's right to exist and did not accept U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

As for the situation in Jordan, King Hussein's inability to regain territory on the West Bank and his crackdown on the PLO in September 1970 persuaded the Arab League to set aside Jordan's claims to represent the Palestinians. Instead, at a summit conference in October 1974, the Arab League recognized the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

The election of U.S. President Jimmy Carter in 1976 produced the first U.S. administration that attempted to try for a comprehensive settlement by incorporating the PLO into efforts to bring peace to the Middle East. Carter's administration broke new ground when it conceded that Palestinians had "legitimate political rights" that should be upheld by a Middle East settlement (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 97).

Carter had extensive contacts with Middle East leaders. However, his administration failed to obtain the PLO's unconditional recognition of Israel's right to exist and was therefore unable to negotiate with that body. On the other hand, the Israelis rejected the PLO participation in a peace conference and distrusted the Carter administration. The election of an Israeli Likud government (right-wing conservative) under Menachem Begin in May 1977 heightened Israel's hostility toward Washington's policy.

Amidst all these obstacles to peace, Sadat issued a startling declaration during a speech before the Egyptian National Assembly on November 9, 1977: He would go anywhere to achieve peace—even to Israel. True to his word, on November 19, 1977, he went to Israel to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Begin. "For the first time in modern history, an Arab leader on a mission of state under the eyes of a captivated world stepped onto Israeli soil . . . Sadat came offering peace and acceptance, that 'sacred message . . . of security, safety, and peace to every man, woman, and child in Israel' " (Saunders, 1985, 1). In his speech to the Israeli parliament on November 20, 1977, Sadat spoke of compromise and reconciliation and initiated the "first real breakthrough in more than thirty years of Arab-Israeli hostility" (Lesch & Tessler, 1989, 3).

Sadat believed that his visit to Israel would quell Israeli fears and transform the negotiating climate. He also felt encouraged by Carter's personal request that he break the diplomatic stalemate. He did not anticipate, however, the anger that his move would cause in the rest of the Arab world. Indeed, he ex-

pected that—despite momentary criticism—Arab governments would support Egypt in its move for peace with Israel.

For its part, the Soviet Union strongly criticized the Sadat visit to Israel as a legitimization of Israeli occupation of Arab lands and an effort to isolate both the PLO and the Soviet Union. Despite strong Soviet criticism of the Sadat visit, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher sought to downplay Soviet negativism, claiming that the Soviets had a role to play in the outcome of the negotiations. This position was challenged, however, by former United States Secretary of State Kissinger, who attacked the Soviet Union for opposing the Sadat visit and discouraging other Arabs from endorsing it. “The maximum role that the Soviets should play, argued Kissinger, would be to participate in endorsing an agreement that the parties had reached directly” (Freedman, 1979, 68).

The Israeli-Egyptian negotiations were on the verge of collapsing when Israel attacked Lebanon in March 1978 in response to PLO commandos who hijacked a bus near Tel Aviv and killed Israeli civilians. Although the United States pressured Israel to withdraw in June 1978, Israeli forces retained a security zone in south Lebanon.

To prevent Israeli-Egyptian negotiations from collapsing, Carter invited Sadat and Begin to his retreat at Camp David to resume negotiations. On September 17, 1978, the Camp David accords were signed by Sadat, Begin, and Carter. The accords included two agreements. The first, “A Framework for Peace in the Middle East,” set forth guidelines for treaties between Israel and each of its Arab neighbors, with a focus on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, in order to reach a solution to the Palestinian problem. The second, “A Framework for the Conclusion of the Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel,” was a draft proposal for a peace agreement to be negotiated and signed within three months. This called for a phased Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai over a period of three years and a full restoration of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. The United Nations would oversee provisions of the accords to satisfy both sides. In this accord, the parties agreed to enter into negotiations over the establishment of a self-governing authority for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, based on U.N. Resolution 242. The accord did not stop settlement construction or resolve Jerusalem’s status (Diller, 1994).

“The Camp David agreements simultaneously lessened Arab rejectionism and Israeli suspicion. In this context, the accords could be viewed as a major step forward and, however viewed, must be regarded as a vast improvement on the methods of violence and terror so often employed by both sides” (Bickerton & Klausner, 1998, 202).

Although the Camp David accords resulted in a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, they ignored the future of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. These issues are still unresolved.

Most Arab governments were shocked at the terms, which they believed satisfied Egypt’s interests at the expense of the Palestinians. An Arab League

summit convened in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad in November 1978 to organize opposition against Egypt. When the Israel-Egypt peace treaty was signed, all the Arab states—except Oman and Sudan—broke diplomatic relations with Egypt and suspended Egypt from the Arab League. They also expelled Egypt from inter-Arab banks and investment companies, banned the sale of oil to Egypt, and closed their airspace to Egyptian planes.

In his comment on the Camp David accords, Johan Galtung, author of the book *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Two Decades of Change* (1988), said:

“The core conflict is between Jews and Arabs in this area, more particularly between Israelis and Palestinians, over the exercise of the type of territorial rights associated with national sovereignty. . . . There was a process associated with Camp David, but that was a ‘peace process’ imposed by Egypt and Israel [and the United States] on the Palestinians with no Palestinians present. By that process, the Palestinians were fragmented.” (322)

Sadat failed to achieve gains in the West Bank negotiations that would have restored his credibility and gained him the trust he lost in the Arab world after signing the Camp David accords. The Israeli government accelerated the construction of Jewish settlements on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and declared unified Jerusalem the eternal capital of Israel in July 1980.

Nevertheless, President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin shared the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize while President Carter, their host at Camp David, led the applause for the risks they had taken at home and the sacrifices they had made.

During his final year in office, Carter was preoccupied with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and revolutionary Iran’s seizure of U.S. hostages. When Ronald Reagan replaced Carter in the White House in 1981, Reagan distanced himself from his predecessor’s policies and signaled to Israel that his priority was U.S. support for a strategic partnership to curtail Soviet influence in the Middle East.

For Sadat and Begin, the price of peace became discouragingly high. “From Palestine to Iran, raging Moslem fundamentalists for some time had been trying to arouse the Arab world in turn against all ‘foreign’ influences, including Israel and the United States, with grave consequences for both. Each dispute, whether it involved Egyptian dealings with Israel, or the religious sanctity of the rights of the Palestinian or Iranian peoples, became a cause that was fought for with violence that often burst all bounds” (Hohenberg, 1998, 211).

In the summer of 1981, Sadat cracked down on his increasingly vocal critics inside Egypt, which triggered a violent reaction. Members of the Islamist-oriented Jihad group assassinated Sadat on October 6, 1981, while he was viewing a military parade celebrating the October War. Sadat was succeeded by his vice president, Hosni Mubarak, also a trusted American ally. Even though President Reagan could not risk appearing in Cairo (on the advice of his Secret Service guards), he sent three former presidents—Jimmy Carter, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford—to the funeral of the slain Egyptian

leader. "Another among the eighty chiefs of state who attended, Prime Minister Begin, came from Jerusalem to pay his tribute to the Egyptian leader who had given his life to peace" (Hohenberg, 1998, 215).

## ISRAELI-EGYPTIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

With respect to bilateral relations between Israel and Egypt, the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai was completed on schedule. Also, both countries started exchanging ambassadors early in 1980. In addition, they coordinated the development of tourist exchanges, established a joint agricultural development company, and planned to produce cooperative ventures in several other areas (Lesch & Tessler, 1989, 6).

Egypt was the first Arab country to make peace with Israel, but that peace has always been a "frosty affair" that involves little real partnership between the two countries. Despite their trade and cultural ties, both Egypt and Israel continued to distrust each others' motives, "a distrust that was enhanced considerably by their inability to make any significant headway in negotiations over the West Bank and Gaza. Israelis wondered about and debated whether Egypt was sincerely committed to peace or whether Sadat's overture was simply a tactical shift in Arab efforts to destroy the Jewish State. Egypt expressed similar doubts about Israeli sincerity, often questioning whether Israel had any intention of fulfilling its promise to accept Palestinian self-determination" (Lesch & Tessler, 1989, 7). Ten years after the Camp David accords, Begin said that "full normalization of relations with Egypt still hasn't arrived and we're watching it" (Diller, 1994, 202).

Throughout the 1990s, the Egyptian and Israeli leaderships have clashed publicly over a wide range of issues that have brought the two countries to the brink of crisis. "The verbal war [between Israel and Egypt] reveals deep insecurity, suspicion, and hostility . . . This (verbal war) raises disturbing questions not only about the future direction of Egyptian-Israeli relations but also about the long-term viability of the peace process itself" (Fawaz, 1995, 69).

The main point of contention is the character and composition of the new Middle East order and the roles of Egypt and Israel in it. Their competing visions struggle to shape the region's dynamics in their own images. Most segments of Egypt's civil society have expressed deep mistrust of Israel. Most intellectuals, trade unions, and cultural and religious figures have called on the government to refuse normalization with Israel and even to reassess its position on the peace process. For example, the former Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Egypt's most important center for Islamic learning, refused a request to meet the former Israeli President Ezer Weizman, during the latter's visit to Cairo in December 1994, saying that "the climate was wrong because of the continuing Israeli occupation of Arab countries and Jerusalem" (Fawaz, 1995, 75).

Although much of the verbal war between Israel and Egypt is mere rhetoric designed to test the other nation's will and commitment, the fundamental po-

litical differences between Egypt and Israel should not be minimized. These disputes revolve around Israel's and Egypt's political and economic roles in the Middle East order and the lack of progress on both the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian fronts. Given their political and military weights and geostrategic positions, Egypt's and Israel's interests are bound to clash in the new Middle East. The challenge for both will be to keep their competition in check and prevent their cold peace from turning into cold war.

The frightening thing is that the verbal escalation between Egypt and Israel finds deeper and more hostile echoes within the public opinion of both countries. In the absence of public opinion polls and a probing press, it is difficult to gauge accurately Egyptian public opinion about Israel.

However, a poll conducted by one of the national Egyptian newspapers in December 1994 found that for most Egyptians the "psychological barrier" with Israel is still very much in place 15 years after the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty. The poll, which sampled the views of 1,505 Egyptians 18 years of age and older, showed that the public was opposed to formal ties with Israel. Asked whether they would buy Israeli goods and whether they would like to visit Israel, 71 percent of respondents said no. An even greater majority—75 percent—said no to the eventuality of industrial cooperation with Israel. Although a majority expressed little faith in the ability of the peace process to restore Palestinian rights, the poll revealed much greater dissatisfaction regarding Egypt's relations with Israel. Results of the poll showed that "the Egyptian public felt it had its own ax to grind with Israel" (Fawaz, 1995, 76). Ironically, the upper strata of the Egyptian society, who are expected to have more crystallized and enlightened views, were highly represented in the poll.

In a similar vein, Israeli public opinion polls conducted during the early 1990s revealed a hardening of views regarding concluding peace agreements with the Palestinians and Syrians. The Israeli newspapers published several articles fretting about the state of relations with Egypt and calling for retaliatory measures against the Egyptians.

## **DOES PEACE MEAN NORMALIZATION?**

Since Israel and Egypt signed their peace treaty in 1978, the two countries have been maintaining "normal" political and diplomatic relations; however, the Israeli-Egyptian normal relations were only on the political level, not on the popular level. From my point of view as an Egyptian who was born and raised in Egypt, the average Egyptian person can neither comprehend nor accept maintaining a normal relationship with Israel.

The Israelis want to maintain "full" normal relations with Egypt because they have always felt isolated in the Middle East, and maintaining a normal relationship with a leading Arab country like Egypt would help them end their isolation in the region. The Israeli society has a deep human craving for accep-

tance. "Because Jewish experience has included rejection and traumatic persecution (during the Holocaust), the yearning for acceptance is especially strong in Israel. The Israeli attitude reflects the weariness of war and isolation and the view that long-term security will depend on developing some reciprocal political relationship with neighbors. The Israeli people search every Arab statement and move for implied acceptance of the Jewish state" (Saunders, 1985, 39).

The Israeli government allows its people to visit Egypt for business, and even for tourism. In fact, many Israeli citizens regularly visit the Sinai Peninsula, which is a very popular Egyptian tourist site on the southern borders of Israel. However, to this day, the only Egyptians who actually visit Israel are the official political and cultural delegations. But average Egyptians who want to visit Israel are not free to visit. Before going to Israel, they would have to be interrogated by the Egyptian intelligence service and in most cases would be denied. I believe that even if average Egyptian citizens were allowed to visit Israel freely without any governmental restrictions they still would not consider visiting Israel. I cannot imagine an Egyptian family, for example, taking a weekend vacation in Tel Aviv. Why? Because of the psychological barrier. It is a barrier that has been created by years and years of antagonism with Israelis; a barrier that was strengthened by the Egyptian and the Arab news media at large which have enforced the Arabs' stereotypes about the Israelis as invaders of Arab land. Many Egyptians stereotype the Israelis as heartless, aggressive, and stingy. Many Egyptians cannot even imagine watching an Israeli soap opera on television, let alone visiting Israel.

In Egypt today, there are some pro-peace groups who call for proceeding further with the normalization of the Israeli-Egyptian relations; however, there are other groups that totally oppose this normalization and ostracize any Egyptian who visits Israel for business. For the latter groups, maintaining normal relations with Israel is considered to be a "betrayal" of Arab nationalism. They say they do not want to shake hands with the Israelis who are occupying Arab land. They feel that Israel's settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip demonstrated a lack of Israeli good faith in honoring the Camp David commitment to leave the question of sovereignty in those territories open.

The Israelis have their own complaints. Many of them are disillusioned about the situation of the bilateral relations between Israel and Egypt. They argue that maintaining full normalization with Egypt would provide a lift to the peace process and an opportunity for Egypt to speak openly and directly with Israelis within Israel about the effect on normalization of a continuation of the larger process.

## FROZEN COMMUNICATION

Throughout much of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Arab nations have expressed their reluctance to communicate directly with Israel, and several U.N., national, and nonofficial representatives have acted as intermediaries. Those

intermediaries have, on several occasions, distorted the messages, leading to misperceptions by both the senders and the recipients of the conveyed information. “The governmental mediator may be motivated by self-interest. . . . He/she may sincerely want to facilitate a solution but can never be wholly detached from the national interest of his or her state” (Bailey, 1990, 425).

Since the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the level of government control over the flow of information in the Middle East conflict has been dictated by the fact that this is a crisis over peace rather than over war. “While the public and journalists are willing to suspend certain freedoms during times of war, they insist upon full disclosure in times of peace” (Wolfsfeld, 1997, 95).

Egypt should continue to play its role as a major mediator and facilitator of communication between Israel and the Arab countries. Egypt has already negotiated its treaty, so the issue is not so much Egypt’s judgment about Israel’s readiness to negotiate. The important contribution that Egypt can bring to further negotiations is its experience in dealing with Israel. “The first step in reviving the broader peace process is to put the Egyptian-Israeli relationship back on the tracks. . . . Showing that the relationship is still alive and can grow . . . could help create a political environment in which Israelis could assess other opportunities to negotiate against the background of a positive experience” (Saunders, 1985, 102).

## THE INTIFADA

Palestinians appeared to be divided in the 1980s. However, a drastic transformation took place at the grassroots level that reinvigorated the national movement. The *Intifada* (uprising) that swept the West Bank and the Gaza Strip during the period 1988–1990 was a mass movement rather than one run by the political elite. It was a clear manifestation of a social revolution that involved the entire Palestinian body politic. The Israeli army responded massively to the *Intifada*, but the diffuse nature of the protests was very strong. Teenagers played cat-and-mouse games with soldiers, throwing stones at them and then dashing away when the soldiers shot rubber-coated bullets and tear gas. The *Intifada* compelled Washington to turn its attention to the Middle East and to open a dialogue with the Israelis and the PLO (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998).

The *Intifada* had the immediate effect of redrawing the border between Israel and the Occupied Territories. It forced the Israelis to rethink their position on the occupation. The PLO leaders made use of the opportunity offered to them by the uprising. In November 1988, the PNC officially called for an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with its capital in East Jerusalem. For the first time, the PNC accepted U.N. resolutions that called for territorial partition and that recognized Israel. The U.S. administration responded positively and opened a dialogue with the PLO.

## ARAFAT AT THE SECURITY COUNCIL

In 1988 Arafat sought to address the U.N. General Assembly. However, the Reagan administration blocked his visa access, in contravention to its agreement with the United Nations, and during a period of otherwise improved relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. The entire General Assembly met in Geneva, instead of New York, to hear Arafat speak at a cost to the United Nations of nearly a half million dollars (Donahue & Prosser, 1997).

In response to the killing of Palestinians by Israeli troops in 1990, Arafat called for an urgent Security Council meeting. The Bush administration had to consider its stated immigration policy, its past support of Israel, the ongoing *Intifada* against Israeli military forces, and the recent Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians. The United States agreed to hold the Security Council meeting in Geneva if Arafat would not push his visa request. By this arrangement, the PLO was awarded a small victory.

In his speech before the Security Council on May 25, 1990, Arafat said:

Over the past 30 months, 1,200 Palestinian martyrs have fallen under the bullets of the occupiers. More than 80,000 citizens have been injured as a result of various kinds of repression ranging from severe beatings, the breaking of bones and the use of rubber bullets and live ammunition to the use of internationally prohibited poison gases, which have caused more than 60,000 miscarriages and permanent handicaps to thousands of children, women, and men, in addition to other kinds of terrorism and repression. . . . The heroic people's *Intifada* against the Israeli occupation of our country will continue until we wrest our right to freedom and national independence on our national soil. (quoted in Donahue & Prosser, 1997, 256–257)

## CONCLUSION

This chapter shed some light on the historical background of the Arab-Israeli conflict, how it originated and developed, and how complicated it became. Also discussed was the relationship between Israel and Egypt within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and how various factors, such as concern about security and public opinion, have affected the communication between the two countries.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the signing of the Oslo accords, the Camp David 2000 negotiations, the new uprising, and Egypt's position regarding these developments.



## 2

---

### OSLO AND AFTER

Under President George Bush, the United States called for comprehensive negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. That led to the Madrid Peace Conference, which opened on October 30, 1991. For the first time, Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian, and Palestinian delegates sat down with Israeli representatives to address their fundamental problems. The altered climate was signaled by the Soviets' restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel in December 1991.

Following the Madrid conference, bilateral negotiations opened between Israel and each of its opponents—Lebanon, Syria, and a Jordanian-Palestinian team. The bilateral talks were initially deadlocked for two reasons. One reason was that Israel's Likud government adhered to a position that opposed giving up any land, even in the context of peace. The other was that the Palestinians' status in the talks remained vague: "Because Israel refused to deal officially with the PLO and because the Arab states supported the PLO's claim to be the official voice of the Palestinians, negotiations could not be very productive in the PLO's absence" (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998, 34).

#### OSLO ACCORDS

Even when the Labor Party formed a new Israeli government in July 1992, negotiations barely moved forward. However, Israel opened secret talks di-

rectly with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under the auspices of the Norwegian foreign ministry. These talks resulted in the signing of the Oslo I agreement by the then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Palestine Liberation Leader Yasser Arafat on September 13, 1993. This was a major turning point in the Middle East. The Israelis and the Palestinians agreed in their “Declaration of Principles” to recognize each other’s legitimacy and, moreover, to establish Palestinian self-rule within the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

A second agreement in May 1994 enabled the PLO to form a Palestinian Authority in Jericho and the Gaza Strip, followed by the establishment of a Palestinian civil administration over the entire West Bank for a five-year interim period. This agreement enabled Arafat to become president of the Palestinian Authority. Arafat and the PLO officials returned to Gaza and Jericho in July 1994—for the first time since 1967.

Many Palestinians were disappointed that executive power remained concentrated in the hands of Arafat, and polls indicated that the public overwhelmingly expected Arafat to implement laws and resolutions passed by the legislature. In practice, Arafat ignored most legislative acts and even jammed the airwaves to prevent legislative sessions from being broadcast live by radio. When a poll was taken in late 1996, nearly a quarter of the respondents had a negative view about the status of human rights under the Palestinian Authority (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998).

The Israeli–PLO agreement led, in October 1994, to Oslo II, a second major agreement between Israel and the PLO. This agreement gave the PLO partial authority over villages on the West Bank but remained subject to stringent Israeli security controls.

The breakthrough in Israeli–PLO relations had immediate consequences for relations between Israel and the Arab world. Jordan used its bilateral negotiations with Israel to conclude a formal peace treaty on October 26, 1994. That accord delineated their territorial border, established complementary security arrangements, specified their allocations of water in the Jordan River basin, and opened up trade, communications, and tourism. King Hussein of Jordan then became an important intermediary between Israel and the PLO.

Other Arab regimes also cautiously contacted Israel. For example, Israel exchanged economic liaison offices with Tunisia and Oman in early 1996 and negotiated with Qatar to purchase its natural gas. In contrast to the accords involving Israel, the PLO, and Jordan, Israel and Syria could not reach a complete agreement with regard to the future of the Golan Heights.

Following the Oslo II agreement, Rabin shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994 with his foreign minister, Shimon Peres, and Arafat. However, polarization inside Israel was so severe that some Israelis viewed Rabin as a traitor for reaching an accord with Arafat and conceding the principle of land-for-peace. At the end of a peace rally in Tel Aviv on November 4, 1995, Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli Jew opposed to the peace process (Freedman, 1998).

In its meeting on April 22–24, 1996, in Gaza, the PLO revoked from its charter the articles that called for the destruction of the state of Israel and that thereby violated the 1993–1995 accords with Israel. On January 19, 1997, the PLO authorized its legal committee to begin drafting a new PLO charter.

In his comment on the Oslo accords, Edward Said (2000), in his book *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* said:

Oslo brought one significantly new thing, namely, the first-time official admission by an Israeli prime minister that there was a Palestinian people [approximately 7.5 million in number] with its own representatives. Beyond that, the terms of the agreement exactly reflected the huge difference in power between the two sides. Nothing was said about Palestinian sovereignty and self-determination. No end to the presence of the settlements was mentioned. . . . East Jerusalem remained under Israeli control: Oslo passed that over. The refugees expelled in 1948 were left as they have been for the last fifty years, homeless and uncompensated, despite numerous international and UN covenants and resolutions. (313)

## EGYPT'S REACTIONS TO THE OSLO ACCORDS

At the official level, Egypt's reaction to the Oslo accords was, not unexpectedly, one of sweet vindication. The agreement reinforced Egypt's own 1979 peace treaty with Israel and made its endless rounds of peace-process diplomacy over the last few years before the accord seem justified. On the popular level, the Oslo accords received a warm reception. Though some leftist and Islamist intellectuals pontificated about its loopholes and flaws, most approved in the end, saying it was the best that could be hoped for. Only the radical Islamic movement rejected it completely. "But the ink had hardly dried on the landmark document before its visions of expanding Middle East horizons and opportunities began provoking fear and loathing among Egyptian policymakers and businesspeople" (Murphy, 1994, 80).

For one, Egypt worked itself out of a job. In the past, its special relationship with Israel gave Egypt the unique role of interlocutor between Israel and the Arabs. However, after the Oslo accords, which allowed the Palestinians to talk directly to the Israelis, some Egyptian pundits started to ask the question: On what will Egypt's regional role be based? Another whispered apprehension was that once the Palestinian deal was supplemented by similar Israeli pacts with Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, "the Levant will rise to reclaim its traditional position as the commercial leader of the Middle East" (Murphy, 1994, 81).

Many Egyptian businesspeople spoke with dread of the competition they could face from Israelis teamed up with Palestinian businessmen. To allay such fears, Egypt moved quickly to hold business seminars with Palestinian and Israeli businesspeople and announced bureaucratic "reforms" to facilitate foreign investment. And even as the Israeli-Palestinian self-rule pact was being signed, senior Egyptian and Israeli economic officials were meeting in Cairo for the first time since 1981 to discuss improving trade ties.

The Egyptian ruling elite resented and mistrusted Israel's decision to bypass Egypt and establish direct ties with other Arab states. They felt that Egypt should continue to be the mediator between Israel and other Arab states. Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa made it clear that Egypt was opposed to the formation of a Middle East common market before a comprehensive political settlement was reached. Egyptian President Mubarak intervened to allay the fears of Egyptian intellectuals: "Any assumption that Israel is capable of swallowing up Egypt is wrong. Egypt has always been, and will continue to be, a pivotal state in the region" (Fawaz, 1995, 70).

These tensions have made a cold peace downright arctic. Today, both of the two great breakthroughs in the Middle East process—the Camp David accords and the Oslo accords—are at risk.

### TERMINATION OF THE PEACE PROCESS

Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres, sought to expedite the peace process by accelerating the withdrawal of Israeli troops from major Palestinian cities on the West Bank. The peace process, however, received a major blow in February and March of 1996 when a series of suicide attacks by Palestinian Islamic militants in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv shook Israel's support for the peace accords and put an end to the dialogue between Israel and the PLO. These attacks were the primary reason behind the election of the right-wing coalition government headed by Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu on May 29, 1996. Netanyahu was elected prime minister by 50.4 percent of the vote. He was far less interested in the Middle East peace process than his predecessor had been. The Likud Party formed a coalition government that stated its determination to resume constructing Jewish settlements on the West Bank, retain the Golan Heights, and prevent the formation of a Palestine state. Likud had benefited politically from terrorist attacks by Palestinian groups in Israel, which made Israelis fear that peace had not brought them national security. Netanyahu closed Israel to residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for extended periods of time, which led to clashes between Palestinian and Israeli soldiers in several West Bank towns.

The Netanyahu government shattered the status quo on the issue of Jewish settlements. "It was Netanyahu's commitment to expand settlements as part of a broader hard-line ideological policy—a policy that rejects the principle of territorial compromise, a Palestinian state, and negotiations over Jerusalem" (Rosenblum, 1998, 64). Netanyahu used his settlement policy as an instrument of denial of another nation. He eased procedures for obtaining building permits in the West Bank and Gaza and approved a request by Jewish settlers to set up three hundred mobile homes in settlements. Moreover, he pledged \$5 million of immediate aid to help compensate for past financial burdens the Jewish settlers had to bear "as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian agreements" (Rosenblum, 1998, 64). Furthermore, Netanyahu put forward approximately

two hundred plans for building thousands of new houses for Jewish settlers. By the end of 1996, the Palestine Council sent Arafat a request to study the possibility of suspending the negotiations should the Israelis continue with settlement activity. Therefore, the peace process passed through a period of stagnation from mid-1996 to the end of 1998 (Freedman, 1998).

## EGYPT'S REACTIONS TO NETANYAHU'S POLICIES

Most Egyptians at both the official and popular levels did not approve of Netanyahu's dealings with the Palestinians. The mood in Cairo during Netanyahu's term was angry, and the reason was simple. Egypt likes to see itself as an "elder brother" among Arabs. With the Netanyahu administration's perceived lack of interest in the peace process, Egypt felt obliged to step in, if only to shout and flex its muscles. The shouting was loud and personal. Immaturation was the least of the insults that Egyptian officials directed at Netanyahu. Some called him "clinically paranoid."

The Egyptian press revoltingly stuck a Hitler mustache on Netanyahu's pictures and called for assassins to "do it" to him. An editorial that appeared in the weekly edition of *Al Abram* (one of the generally staid official newspapers in Egypt) in October 1996 stated: "Violence is all but inevitable if Mr. Netanyahu continues to reside in one world, while the rest of us on planet Earth seek to sort through the mockery he has made of the peace process."

Netanyahu accused the Egyptian government of deliberately stirring up popular feeling, especially after the Egyptian opposition parties, university students, and retired generals started calling for the punishment of Israel. Moreover, senior religious figures in Egypt joined in to denounce what they called the "Judaisation of Jerusalem." Pope Shenouda, leader of Egypt's six million Coptic Christians, raised cheers by reaffirming his church's ban on pilgrimage to the Holy City.

## WYE RIVER PLANTATION AGREEMENT

On October 23, 1998, Arafat and Netanyahu agreed to a land-for-peace deal on the West Bank after a nine-day summit organized by then U.S. President Bill Clinton, at the Wye River Conference Center in Maryland.

At the time the Wye agreement was taking place, the West Bank was divided into three areas: Area A, which was entirely run by Palestinians except for security, water, and exits and entrances; Area B, jointly patrolled by Palestinian and Israeli soldiers, with security, water, building permits, exits, and entrances entirely controlled by Israel; and Area C, which is completely Israeli. Before Wye, these amounted respectively to 2.8 percent, 24 percent, and 72 percent of the land area. Wye gave the Palestinians an additional one percent from Area C, and 14.2 percent from Area B, thus putting 18.2 percent under full Palestinian

Authority control with the same exclusions and provisos. In addition, Israel would transfer 13 percent more from Area C to Area B.

In his comment on the Wye agreement, Edward Said (2000), stated:

The U.S. press as usual reported the proceedings of a flagrant disregard of the facts. No one bothered to point out, to take one example, that the 40 percent of the West Bank's surface supposedly being given to Arafat's corrupt Authority was broken down into bits and pieces that tell a very different story, all of it subject to Israel's choice of date and location of the land to be partially vacated. No settlements and no bypassing roads are to be given: on the contrary, Israel asked the United States for an additional \$1.3 billion for the redeployments. (294)

In his memoirs titled *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place among the Nations*, Netanyahu (2000) commented on the Wye agreement:

Instead of a process in which Israel would retreat to the virtually indefensible pre-1967 line even before final settlement negotiations were concluded, I sought and achieved a different result at Wye: that most of the West Bank would remain in our hands pending the start of these negotiations. Israel would retain some 60 percent of the territory with all the West Bank's Jewish population; the Palestinian Authority would have some 40 percent of the area with virtually the entire Palestinian population. (344)

The few months after the Wye agreement witnessed the suspension by Netanyahu of further implementation of the agreement after the first phase of withdrawal, ostensibly because of the failure of the Palestinian Authority to fulfill its security-related obligations toward Israel.

## BARAK REPLACES NETANYAHU

On May 17, 1999, Ehud Barak of the Labor Party was elected prime minister of Israel after defeating Netanyahu by a 56 to 46 margin in the popular vote. Netanyahu announced his decision to resign from politics within hours of his stunning personal defeat. During the election campaign, Israeli ads dramatized the fact that Barak, a former chief of staff and foreign minister, had led the successful antiterrorism campaigns and was Israel's most highly decorated soldier. The ads were effective in countering the Likud charges that a Labor victory would endanger Israel's security.

Upon his victory Barak promised that he would rapidly implement the Wye River agreement, enter into permanent status talks with the Palestinians, and vigorously pursue resumption of peace talks with Syria and Lebanon, which had been suspended in February 1996. Barak also managed to put together a broad-based coalition that gave him a comfortable initial majority of 75 in the 120-member Knesset (Gruen, 2000).

Barak's victory was welcomed by most of the Arab world, most notably by late President Hafez al-Assad of Syria and young King Abdullah of Jordan,

who had succeeded King Hussein after his death in February 1999, and who pledged to continue his father's commitment to peace.

During his first few weeks in office, Barak single-handedly reenergized the peace process, and he agreed with then U.S. President Clinton on an ambitious agenda: to make peace not only with the Palestinians but also with Syria and Lebanon. However, Barak announced that he wanted "physical separation" from the Palestinians. He also vowed never to give up Israeli sovereignty over any part of Jerusalem, which Palestinians also claim as their capital. Then, in the summer of 2000, Barak withdrew his troops from southern Lebanon, hoping that this move would be part of a rapprochement with Syria, which had 35,000 troops there.

Barak continued to press for closure on final status talks with the Palestinians and a possible deal with Syria to include withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Barak said his goal was the creation of a Palestinian state in 50 percent of the West Bank. However, "he failed because in one essential way he was too similar to Rabin to break from his mentor's mold: he too is a loner, convinced that only he is smart enough to be entrusted with war and peace. He refused to involve most of his Cabinet in the peace process. . . . The leader who insisted that Israelis make peace among themselves before making peace with their neighbors couldn't even make peace with the ministers in his own government" (Halevi, 2000, 15).

In his comment on Barak's policies in the Middle East, Edward Said (2000) remarked:

For Barak, Jerusalem (remained) basically unnegotiable (except for giving Palestinians authority over a few sacred places in the old city and allowing Abu Dis to become their new Jerusalem); the settlements for the most part will stay, as will the bypass roads that now crisscross the territories; sovereignty, borders, overall security, water, and air rights will be Israel's. . . . The real problem (was) that Barak (did) not seem inclined to visions of coexistence or of equality between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. He clearly said that separation is what he (wanted), not integration." (xv)

## CAMP DAVID 2000

Arafat and Barak met during a 15-day summit (July 11–25, 2000) hosted by U.S. President Bill Clinton at Camp David. The involved parties discussed a solution to the Middle East conflict and the progress in the peace process.

At the time these negotiations were conducted, nearly a decade after the "peace process," Israel was in full control (security and administrative) of 61.2 percent of the West Bank and 20 percent of Gaza, and in full security control of 26.8 percent of the West Bank. That left the Palestinians with full control of 12 percent of the West Bank. The number of Jewish settlers—now about 200,000—has doubled during the life of the "peace process."

Barak's offer at Camp David to withdraw from 90 percent of the West Bank was contingent upon Arafat accepting the settlements and Israeli rather than

Palestinian citizenship for the settlers and accepting Israel's denial of legal or moral responsibility for the Palestine refugees. Arafat refused Barak's proposal. The Camp David summit, which was intended to prepare the ground for a final push toward a comprehensive agreement, fell apart (Omestad, et al., 2000).

According to Nuechterlein (2000), in an article titled "Peace When?" published in *First Things* magazine, Clinton pushed the "peace process" beyond its capacity to respond. Reliable sources indicated that Arafat urged the U.S. not to insist on the Camp David summit in July because the Palestinians were not willing to accept Barak's concessions. According to Nuechterlein,

Prime Minister Barak was as eager to [go to] Camp David as Arafat was reluctant, and he apparently persuaded himself that he had proposals for a settlement so forthcoming that they would constitute an offer the Palestinians could not refuse. He would grant statehood, make concession on territory in the West Bank and on the right of return for refugees, and even—something no Israeli government had ever before considered—put up for negotiation the status of Jerusalem as his nation's united and undivided capital. . . . But the Palestinians—supported by the major Arab powers—would not take yes for an answer and refused the deal. (7)

### THE NEW INTIFADA

After the failure of the Camp David negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis in July 2000, the situation in the Middle East remained extremely tense, unsettled, and edgy. The relations between the parties involved in the Middle East conflict were not just worse than they were before the Camp David negotiations, but they were about as bad as they could be short of war.

The region exploded on September 28, 2000, when the hawkish leader of Israel's opposition Likud, Ariel Sharon (later to be elected Israel's prime minister), visited the Temple Mount (Al Aqsa Mosque) in Jerusalem, protected by one thousand riot police. This visit sparked violence between Palestinian youths and Israeli troops. Since then, Israelis and Palestinians have seemed to be mobilizing for possible war. The youthful street fighters of the new *Intifada*—the *Tanzim*, released a communique calling for a unified front against the "Zionist enemy." It was like old times again. For four months, Arafat and the Palestinians had hoped for the sympathy of the world with the mounting civilian deaths, many of them children (Omestad, et al., 2000).

Whatever middle ground existed for Israeli and Palestinian moderates vanished. Palestinians talked of a war of independence, and the conflict took an ugly turn as the stone-throwing crowds of Palestinian youths were replaced by masked men armed with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

Israel complained that Arafat suddenly released 60 jailed terrorists from the fundamentalist groups the Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Anti-Israeli emotions overcame divisions between Palestinian supporters and opponents of the

peace process. Palestinians were citing as their inspiration and model the Hezbollah guerrillas, who forced Israel out of southern Lebanon in June 2000, ending 18 years of occupation (Omestad, et al. 2000).

On January 4, 2001, Arafat accepted President Clinton's general outline for an end to the 52-year Palestinian-Israeli conflict, sustaining Clinton's hopes, however faint, for a Middle East breakthrough in the last days of his presidency. However, no sufficient progress was made to bring the two sides together for one last stab at a deal before Clinton left office on January 20, 2001. Today, the conflict is very complex with the persistence of the Palestinian-Israeli violence that has claimed hundreds of lives and thousands of injuries since the Palestinian uprising began in late September 2000 (Lancaster & Richburg, 2001).

### EGYPT'S REACTIONS TO THE NEW *INTIFADA*

During the months of September through December 2000, Egypt continued to play a major role as an Arab mediator and a leading country in the Arab Middle East, trying to stop the violence between the Palestinians and the Israelis and to facilitate talks between the two sides. Moreover, the Egyptian government organized several summits at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheikh that included Palestinian and Israeli leaders.

A former senior aide to late President Sadat said in October 2000,

We in Egypt, and the rest of the Arab world, will have to reexamine the American position and the American bias toward Israel. Egypt will try to rein in the violence, but unless Israel helps, Egypt will fail [to do that] . . . Land for peace was the whole process, so taking more Palestinian territory, that will not bring peace . . . The Israelis can defeat the Palestinians, but they cannot rule the Palestinians. (Radin, 2000, A1)

The Egyptian media are continuing to whip up popular sentiment against Israel. State-controlled newspapers and broadcast outlets are awash in images of fighters against the Jewish state, pictures of the corpses of Palestinian youths, and commentary on Israel's rocketing of Palestinian territories (Radin, 2000, A1).

On November 21, 2000, Egypt recalled its ambassador from Israel, Mohammed Bassiouny, indefinitely, condemning "aggressive acts" by Israeli forces and expressing "deep displeasure" at the Israeli administration after it pounded targets in the Gaza Strip in a reprisal raid. "This step constitutes a very important and basic message that Israel has to understand: We cannot take it any more—the aggressive acts, the excessive use of force and the use of force against Palestinian civilians in their territories . . . Everything has an end . . . The situation cannot be continued like this; however, we stand firm behind a fair and balanced peace process," said Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa. Stunned Israeli Prime Minister Barak tried to downplay the recall, saying he was unhappy with the Egyptian move and hoped that it would be temporary.

Israel said it would not recall its ambassador to Egypt. “Egypt has a role in the peace process, a positive role, and I do not think that the recall of the ambassador . . . contributes to continuation of this positive role” (Drees, 2000, 3).

Following Egypt’s recall of its envoy, Israel’s ambassador to Egypt, Zvi Mazel, accused Egypt’s mostly state-owned media of deliberately misleading public opinion with biased news coverage. He said that many Egyptians had no idea what was really happening in Israel and the Palestinian-ruled areas and were basing their decision on incorrect information. But he said that top-level talks between Egypt and Israel would continue, and said he hoped that Egypt’s envoy would return to his post quickly. “Egypt has an important role to play [in peace efforts] . . . I must say that I personally, and all of us in Israel, are very sorry (about Egypt’s decision to withdraw its ambassador). We have had relations with Egypt for 20 years and relations should not reach this kind of occurrence” (Drees, 2001, 3).

On January 21, 2001, Egypt hosted what was described by political observers as “marathon peace talks” between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators at its Red Sea resort of Taba. Pessimism characterized these negotiations, which have not achieved a breakthrough (Curtius, 2001, 4).

## ASSESSMENT OF THE AMERICAN ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, its well-being and security have been singled out as a major U.S. policy interest. After the late 1940s, U.S. Middle East policy was characterized by a fundamental contradiction—how to maintain close and friendly relations with Arab nations while maintaining intimate relations with Israel, America’s principal ally in the region. This contradiction was compounded by the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, in which Moscow used the Arab-Israeli conflict to its advantage by aligning itself with the Arabs against the Jewish state. During the Cold War era, resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict remained a primary U.S. objective, along with containment of Soviet influence in the region and maintaining free access by the West to Middle East oil (Peretz, 1998).

Some argue that the United States, particularly since the 1967 war, has followed shortsighted policies that caused it to miss several opportunities that might have helped end the conflict years ago. Proponents of this view point to Henry Kissinger’s apparently complacent certainty that the Arab world would not go to war in order to break the 1967–1973 diplomatic stalemate, and to Washington’s refusal to negotiate with the PLO between 1975 and 1988. However, opponents of that view argue that the United States managed to contain, or at least limit, the frequency and intensity of outbreaks of war between Arabs and Israelis. They also argue that U.S. policy was responsible for conditions that eventually led to the Egypt-Israel, PLO-Israel, and Jordan-Israel peace agreements as well as to negotiations between Syria and Israel

and the recognition of Israel's legitimacy by most of the Arab world (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998).

Every American president from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton had his own proposal for ending the Middle East conflict. Truman urged Israel to take back thousands of Palestinian Arab refugees; Dwight Eisenhower sent Eric Johnston to the region with a scheme for developing its water resources; John F. Kennedy sent Joseph Johnson with a new refugee plan; Richard Nixon's and Gerald Ford's emissary, Henry Kissinger, spent months in shuttle diplomacy; Jimmy Carter played a major role in the Camp David accords that put an end to the conflict between Israel and Egypt; George Bush's secretary of state, James Baker, succeeded in persuading Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians to join in negotiations at the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in October 1991; and Clinton always put the Middle East conflict on top of his foreign policy agenda (Peretz, 1998).

Whether the United States attains its objectives in the Middle East will depend less on its foreign policy than on the course of internal economic, political, and social developments within the region. However, Washington can still influence the pattern of these developments through, for example, encouraging or discouraging large expenditures for weapons, support for or censure of undemocratic regimes, and extending or withholding economic assistance to creative development programs (Peretz, 1998).

## ASSESSMENT OF THE SOVIET ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

The Soviet Union has been involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict since the birth of Israel in 1948 when it gave Israel both military and diplomatic aid in its war against the Arabs. Following the 1948 war, however, Soviet-Israeli relations cooled, and by 1954 the Soviet Union had switched to the Arab side. The Soviet Union backed the Arabs in the 1956, 1967, and 1973 wars, and in the aftermath of the 1973 war, it became increasingly opposed to U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger's efforts to work out a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which the Soviets saw as detrimental to their interests (Freedman, 1979).

The decision by Egyptian President Sadat to visit Jerusalem in 1977 was strongly opposed by the Soviets. They were afraid that if Sadat and Begin successfully negotiated a deal there was a good chance that Jordan, Syria, and moderate Palestinian elements might follow suit, thus leaving the Soviet Union isolated in the Middle East with only radical Libya and Iraq, whom virtually all the other Arab states distrusted, as backers of Soviet policy.

Soon after Sadat's return from Israel, a parade of Arab leaders visited Moscow. The Soviets' invitation to the Arab leaders was aimed at reinforcing Soviet ties with each Arab opponent of Sadat. Then, the Soviets supported the Tripoli Conference, which was held in Libya in December 1977. The conference,

which called for opposing Sadat's negotiations with Israel, was attended by five Arab states: Syria, Iraq, South Yemen, Libya, and Algeria.

When Mikhail Gorbachev took power in the Soviet Union in March 1985, the Middle East was clearly an area of superpower competition. Moscow backed the Arab rejectionists, such as Syria, the PLO, Iraq, Algeria, and Libya, in their confrontation with Israel. Moscow viewed Egypt, an ally of the United States, as an enemy. The U.S.S.R. had no diplomatic relations with Israel, had reduced Jewish emigration from the U.S.S.R. to less than one thousand per year (as opposed to a high of 51,000 in 1979), and continued to champion the anti-Israeli "Zionism is Racism" resolution of the U.N. General Assembly.

Before Gorbachev was ousted from power during the collapse of the Soviet Union, there had been a massive transformation in most Soviet policies toward the Middle East. He had restored full diplomatic relations with Israel in October 1991 and had joined the United States in cosponsoring a U.N. resolution reversing the "Zionism is Racism" resolution. He allowed hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel, and he joined the United States in cosponsoring the Madrid Arab-Israeli peace conference. Gorbachev also cultivated Egypt, making it the centerpiece of Soviet policy in the Arab world. At the same time, Syrian-Russian relations deteriorated when Gorbachev refused to give Syria the weapons it needed for military parity with Israel (Freedman, 1998).

When the Soviet Union collapsed in August 1991, Boris Yeltsin came to power following a coup. In its policies toward the Middle East during Yeltsin's years, Russia had moved from active cooperation with the United States on virtually all Middle East issues to assertions of its independence of U.S. policy in the region. By the summer of 1996, Moscow clearly was pursuing an independent policy in the region, as indicated by its call for a lifting of the sanctions against Iraq (set after the Gulf War in 1991), its mediation attempts in the conflict in southern Lebanon, and its sale of increasingly sophisticated arms to Iran (Freedman, 1998).

Today, with a weakened economy and with the newly independent states to its south, Russia is far less a power in the Middle East than the Soviet Union was. Whether a revived economy and more adept diplomacy will enable Moscow to play a more significant role in the region is a question for the future.

## SHARON BECOMES PRIME MINISTER OF ISRAEL

On February 6, 2001, Ariel Sharon, the Likud right-wing leader won the election race against Ehud Barak and became prime minister of Israel. "Sharon, 72, once considered unelectable because of his role as the architect of Israel's unpopular war in Lebanon, won by an unprecedented margin in Israeli electoral history" (Morris & Demick, 2001, 1). With 99 percent of the vote counted, Sharon had 62.5 percent of the vote; Barak, had 37.4 percent. Voter turnout was a record-low 62 percent.

Many political experts believe that Sharon being in power is a blow to the whole peace process, as he is known for his extremist views. He even announced that he is against all of the terms that were included in the Oslo accords. Moreover, he is a “hated” figure in the Arab world, and therefore no real progress in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations is expected during his term.

Sharon embodies the old expansionist Israel of settlements and the Lebanon war. For Palestinians, he is a symbol of the slaughter that befell them at the hands of Israel’s Lebanese Christian militia allies in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila near Beirut. It was Sharon’s alliance with the Maronite militia forces that enabled them to enter the camps in September 1982, where they killed hundreds of civilians. The official government report found that Sharon as defense minister had “indirect responsibility” for the massacres; and that event remains an essential part of the Arab vision of him. A member of the Palestinian Legislative Council from Gaza said in November 2000: “He (Sharon) could never be anything except a murderer and a criminal” (Rees, 2000, 67).

The rest of the Arab world reacted to Sharon’s election with a mixture of caution and outright hostility. Many Arabs have not forgotten that it was Sharon’s visit to Al Aqsa Mosque in late September 2000 that sparked the new uprising *Intifada* in the Palestinian territories. Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, said after Sharon’s election: “We will wait and see what Sharon will do. Will it be a policy of peace or that of suppression?” (Drummond, 2001, 14).

Jordanian Prime Minister Ali Abu Ragheb, said: “The election of Sharon is an internal affair and we will not issue early judgments about his performance and his government” (Drummond, 2001, 14).

In Syria, a frontline state that failed to reach an agreement with Barak’s government on an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, the reaction in official newspapers was much tougher, saying the election of Sharon amounted to a declaration of war.

Even in Saudi Arabia, normally the most discreet of Arab states when it comes to relations with Israel and the outside world in general, one of its newspapers, *al-Medina*, was outspoken. One of its editorials said following Sharon’s election: “The rivers of blood are coming, and the Palestinians and Arabs must be prepared to confront this new attack” (Drummond, 2001, 14).

Less than 48 hours after Sharon was elected, a car bomb exploded in Jerusalem in an attack that “had the hallmarks of an attempt by his Arab opponents to signal that they will not be deterred by their arch enemy’s return to power” (Reeves, 2001, 13). No one was killed by the bomb, which was claimed by the extremist Palestinian group “The Palestinian Popular Resistance Forces.” A faxed statement from that group said: “It was a first message directed to the criminal and fascist Sharon” (13).

A few days after his election, Sharon succeeded in forming a coalition government with the Labor Party in an attempt to strengthen his power and form

a stabilizing force that could have some influence on his future policies. Sharon continued his predecessors' policy of expanding the building of Jewish settlements in the West Bank by approving three thousand new Jewish units to be built at a controversial Jewish settlement on occupied land, a move that angered the Palestinians.

Throughout the early months of 2001, relations between Israelis and Palestinians continued the downward spiral dictated by the ongoing violence between the two sides and the insular logic of the New *Intifada*. The Israeli army launched several helicopter strikes in Ramallah and Gaza City in response to a series of attacks by Palestinian extremists that killed three Jewish children. The new Israeli coalition government threatened "a stepped-up campaign, including hit squads to assassinate alleged terrorists" (Whitelaw, 2001, 38).

The U.S. administration of George W. Bush, who started his presidency in January 2001, has been on the sidelines with regard to the Middle East conflict, urging restraint by both sides. Pointedly, President Bush called on Arafat to openly condemn terrorism. During Sharon's two-day official visit to the United States on March 20, 2001, he was assured by President Bush that the United States would not impose a peace agreement on the Middle East, giving Sharon the latitude to pursue his skeptical approach toward negotiations with the Palestinians.

## EGYPT CONTINUES ITS PEACE EFFORTS

During his official visit to the United States on April 1, 2001, the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced that Egypt is going to facilitate the situation so that the Palestinians and the Israelis can sit together and negotiate.

Mubarak came to the United States bearing Arab concerns that the United States was stepping back from its role as a peace broker and urged the Bush administration to stay involved in the Middle East and use its influence to save the peace process. Bush assured Mubarak that the United States would remain active in the Middle East peace process. However, he stopped short of pledging the kind of personal mediation effort his predecessor had undertaken. Bush told reporters during the conference with Mubarak: "We will work together to try to convince all parties involved to lay down their arms. We can't force a peace. We will use our prestige and influence as best we can to facilitate a peace" (Hutcheson, 2001, A-5). Mubarak told reporters that he had great hopes that President Bush "will do the maximum effort for peace so as to lessen the tensions and resume negotiations" (A-5).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter gave an overview of the Arab-Israeli conflict since the Oslo accords. As I highlighted in this chapter, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been placed on a new footing since most Arab states started recognizing Israel's legitimacy.

Today, Egypt, Jordan, the PLO, and Israel explicitly recognize each others' legitimacy and right to peace. Syria and Lebanon, by attending the Madrid conference in 1991 and entering into direct negotiations with Israel, implicitly extend recognition to Israel.

However, today, the situation in the Middle East is very tense, especially after the continuous clashes between the Israelis and the Palestinians and the election of Sharon as prime minister of Israel. Egypt continues to play its role as a mediator, but the future of the peace process is yet to be witnessed.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the images and stereotypes held by the Western news media about the Arabs and the Israelis.



# 3

---

## ARABS AND ISRAELIS IN THE WESTERN NEWS MEDIA: IMAGES AND STEREOTYPES

The Middle East is perhaps one of the most misunderstood, misperceived, and stereotyped regions of the world. Many Western journalists operating in the Middle East lack a comprehensive understanding of the cultures that characterize that region. They also lack an awareness of the deep cultural differences between the Middle Eastern countries. This has led to the prevalence of stereotypical images about the Middle East in the Western news media.

### WHAT IS AN IMAGE?

An image can be defined as “a combinatorial construct whose subject is itself a collection of images in the individual memory of various aspects of reality. It is the totality of attributes that a person recognizes or imagines. Images are to varying degrees interdependent on one another. The structure of one is inferred or predicted from that of another; and change in one produces imbalance and, therefore, change in others” (Mowlana, 1997, 3).

It is widely recognized and accepted by social scientists that people create psychological images of the “other” or the “unknown” in order to secure their identity. People have conceived opinions, both genuine and erroneous, of people with different characteristics, whether they be racially, culturally, or gender based, without any true attempt at comprehension. As a result, misinterpretation of other cultures has revealed a common thread that runs

throughout history, fostering stereotypes, discrimination, and often fear or persecution of such groups.

Images consist of affective, cognitive, and operational (action) components. The affective component reflects the individual's like or dislike of the image's focal object and is usually associated with approval or disapproval of its perceived, or cognitive, aspects. The cognitive component is the individual's view of the "inherent" characteristics of the object that he regards as existing independently of his own perception. An image's operational component reflects the behavioral effects of aggregate images, varying with the individual and the type of image involved (Mowlana, 1997).

In terms of international images, the affective reaction usually depends on the individual's or culture's overall disposition to like or to dislike foreign countries in general. The cognitive components are dependent on perceived power as being either threatening or benign.

There are two main effects of social norms on images of international focal objects. First, increased homogeneity of images held by members of groups is fostered by the relatively simplified and undifferentiated quality of social norms. Second, these group norms encourage maintenance of simple cognitive structures in which such images are embedded while at the same time either reinforcing or distorting the effects of direct contact (Scott, 1965).

Formulating an image depends, to a great extent, on the individual's perception of that image. Prosser (1978), in his book *The Cultural Dialogue: An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*, said: "Perception is the most individual process of subjective culture [; it] is formed by the memory of past structured, stable, and meaningful experiences" (198). He also believes that perception, as a cultural universal, can be seen as an inherent capability of all human beings whose cognitive abilities are functioning in a normal fashion. Each culture helps to shape this capability according to the experiences that are common in that particular culture. As individuals, both are acted upon by our culture and act upon it, so too do we perceive through our cultural experiences.

An individual's perceptions of the external world are the experiential elements that help him or her to see the world as stable, structured, and meaningful. Like images, many perceptions are consciously coded and decoded, while many others are not. According to Prosser (1978), "it is precisely such shared, often unarticulated, and sometimes unarticulable patterns of perceptions, communication, and behavior that can be referred to as a culture" (212).

Individual perceptions differ from group perceptions in that the latter do not necessarily recognize national or cultural boundaries. Groups that share the same perceptions to one degree or another develop, and they are intercultural or cross-cultural in nature. "The fewer group identities that a person shares, and the less intensely held the identities which exist with individuals with whom he or she must communicate, the more crossculturally he or she is operating on the basis of a perceptual continuum" (Prosser, 1978, 213).

## STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT IN THE COVERAGE OF THE WESTERN NEWS MEDIA

The mass media cannot be underestimated in terms of their power in perpetuating ethnic and racial bias; they are part of a cultural mechanism that promotes and exploits commercial stereotypes. "Such images become dangerous when they materialize in the complex social narratives and foreign policies enacted simultaneously on the world stage and in the human mind and heart" (Palmer, 1997, 139).

News media images of the Middle East to a great extent have their roots in the media's images of the religions and cultures of Middle Eastern people. Indeed, the religious and cultural identities in Middle East and the media's understanding of the cultural and social structures of the Middle Eastern societies often determine the procedure through which the events, policies, and actions are portrayed. Central to this analysis is the thesis that the Western news media always misrepresent the identities and images of the Middle Easterners. This misrepresentation has resulted from two factors: Western reporters do not understand the political culture and structure of Middle Eastern politics, and the Western media cover the Middle East within the worldview of a (primarily Western) audience. By striving to make the Middle Eastern region familiar to their Western audience, the media often end up distorting the region's complex realities (Kamalipour, 1997).

In this context, Schleifer (1987) stated:

American news organizations could cover the Middle Eastern conflict more accurately if we, the foreign correspondents, were more committed on a day-to-day basis to seek out and secure an understanding of the less visible but complex patterns of social, cultural, and political life than is now the practice; and to do this not only out of a personal intellectual curiosity, by virtue of a broad liberal education, but also as a response that stems directly from professional training. (338)

According to Schleifer, the ongoing reporting of Arab-Israeli conflict by Western correspondents includes all forms of bias, such as technical, technological, social, political, and ethnic. This has distorted the popular perceptions of the region for the past 30 years (347).

Bias charges have been leveled by supporters of both the Arab and the Israeli sides with regard to Western news media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestinian-Americans and other pro-Palestinian groups have accused the Western news media of ignoring or downplaying alleged Israeli human rights violations. Some Arab-American families reportedly have purchased satellite dishes to watch Arab television because of their distrust for the American media (Trigoboff, 2000, 12).

The everyday stories of many Western journalists who cover the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the framing of this conflict in their reporting, tend to favor

the Israeli side over the Arab side. For those journalists, “Israel is a gleaming pool and a patch of green in a baking desert inhabited by hostile elements. . . . An Israeli is a sturdy, tenacious pioneer, as well as a victim of oppression and atrocity, rightly entitled to a homeland of his own.” “If American news media are any test, Israelis are also bronzed, industrious, and strong. They smile, and ride off to war singing songs with a pretty girl in fetching a uniform” (Emery, 1995, 224).

According to Steve Bell, a former anchor for ABC-TV’s *Good Morning America*, many American journalists have an automatic sympathy toward the Jews of Israel because of the Holocaust. According to Bell, “one could even say Americans share guilt feelings on the subject. The human interest and potential for conflict are abundant, and the history of Israel is widely seen as the story of an ‘underdog’ surviving by hard work and heroism” (Bell, 1980, 56).

As defined in the 1947 edition of *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, “The Arabs are one of the oldest and purest peoples, and with the Jews, constitute the best modern representatives of the Semitic race.” However, the Arab Middle East has always been misperceived by the Western news media. According to Shaheen (1984),

the present-day Arab stereotype parallels the image of Jews in pre-Nazi Germany, where Jews were painted as dark, shifty-eyed, venal and threateningly different people. After the holocaust, the characterization of Jews as murderous anarchists or greedy financiers was no longer tolerable. Many [Western] cartoonists, however, reincarnated this caricature and transferred it to another group of Semites, the Arabs. Only now it wears a robe and a headdress instead of a yarmulke and a Star of David.” (12)

Along the same line, Block (2000) mentioned that the world media are distorting the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by focusing on Palestinian anger, but rarely on Palestinians as victims. “When there are [television] programs on what happens, it’s on Palestinian reactions, not on what they are reacting to. . . . When there is a problem of violence, Israelis are shown as humans who suffer. Palestinians are shown as aggressors . . . throwing stones” (B13).

It can be argued that the distorted media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict might affect the way the Arab and Israeli sides are perceived by the Western public. In this regard, CNN announced that it conducted a survey (the number of respondents was not reported) in November 2000 of American public opinion toward the Palestinians and the Israelis. The findings: 43 percent of Americans expressed greater sympathy with Israel: 11 percent with the Palestinians (Foxman, 2000, 8).

## DIVERSITY OF MIDDLE EASTERN CULTURES

In our discussion of as broad a topic as Middle Eastern culture, one might ask questions such as, Is there one culture that we may call Middle Eastern culture? Are the cultural components in the Middle East universally applicable?

The Middle East consists of a large number of countries; and territorially, culturally, religiously, and linguistically, the region is diverse, encompassing nations and people who have distinctive history and heritage. The readers of this book must recognize the great variety and differences that exist among nations of the Middle East. For example, countries in North Africa are not the same as Saudi Arabia or the Arabian Gulf states, despite their Arabness. The Arabian Gulf states have Bedouin origins and traditions that might not be as prevalent in the North African countries. Countries such as Iran and Pakistan are Moslem countries, but they have Persian heritage, which is totally different from the history, language, and ethnic heritage of Arab countries in the region. A country like Egypt, which is overwhelmingly dominated by a Moslem population, has a minority of Copts (Egyptian Christians) whose religious traditions are totally different from those of Egyptian Moslems.

Even the practice of religious norms and traditions is different among Arab countries. For example, in a country like Saudi Arabia, women have to cover their hair and are not allowed to drive. However, this is not the case in other Arab countries where women can walk in the streets without the veil, and they are allowed to drive. In Lebanon and Bahrain, alcohol is served in restaurants and public places. This is not the case in more conservative Arab countries like the rest of the Arabian Gulf states. The practice of Islam is different in a country like Afghanistan where there is religious fanaticism, than it is in countries like Tunisia, Morocco, or Egypt where there is more moderation in the practice of Islam. For example, shop owners in Egypt are not forced to close their shops during prayer times, but in Saudi Arabia they do.

Although Arabic is the most commonly used language in the Arab Middle East, still some terms and phrases have different meanings and connotations in different countries; for example, the same phrase might be offensive in one country and courteous in another. The Egyptian Arabic dialect is the most popular dialect in the Arab Middle East. This is due to the prevalence of Egyptian movies and soap operas shown in the other Arab countries.

It is unfortunate that many Europeans and Americans are not familiar with the Arab and the Islamic cultures. This leads to misunderstandings and the creation of stereotypes. In this context, Edward Said (2000) commented:

A deep gulf separates Arab-Islamic culture and civilization from the United States; in the absence of any collective Arab information and cultural policy, the notion of an Arab people with traditions, cultures, and identities of their own is simply inadmissible in the United States. Arabs are dehumanized; they are seen as violent irrational terrorists always on the outlook for murder and bombing outrages. (212)

## **ISLAM: A RELIGION AND A WAY OF LIFE**

Ever since the appearance of Islam in the seventh century, the history of Arab-Islamic interaction with the West has often been marred by misconcep-

tion, stereotyping, and prejudice. Understanding the Arab-Islamic culture requires attaining a thoughtful insight of Islam as a religion and a way of life.

Most Arabs are Moslems. Even though there are non-Moslem Arabs, it has been observed that “to be Arab and Moslem is truly to belong” (Haque, 1997, 18). Followers of any religion tend to believe that theirs is the only true religion enjoying the blessings of God, and Arabs are no exception.

Islam rests on five basic pillars: creed, which is the fundamental profession of a Moslem’s faith acknowledging that God is One and that Prophet Mohammed is His messenger (*Shahadah*); praying five times a day (*Salat*); paying money to the poor and needy in the amount of one-fortieth of one’s income (*Zakat*); fasting by complete abstinence from food, drink, and sex during the hours of daylight during the Holy month of Ramadan, which is the ninth month of the lunar year (*Sawm*); and pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to the holy Islamic shrine *Kaaba* in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The *Hajj* must be made at least once in one’s lifetime, if health and financial resources permit.

One of the major principles of Islam is surrender to God and submission to His will. A Middle Eastern Moslem child is raised in an environment that emphasizes the notion that whatever happens in life is an expression of God’s will. “In the Middle Eastern culture, human choices and attempts, successes and failures are regarded as manifestations of God’s plan and will” (Haque, 1997, 22).

To the Middle Easterner, the degree of an individual’s religiosity is an indicator of character forthrightness and ethicality. In most Middle Eastern countries, the civil laws are extensions of religious and theological rulings. Even in daily social, business, and official activities, religion is constantly invoked. For example, Arab Moslems often start their work by saying “*Bismillahir-Rahman ir-Rahim*” (In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful).

Moslems accept in faith the religion divinely revealed in the Koran (the Moslems’ holy book) and seek help of the *Sunna* (Prophet Mohammed’s teachings and deeds) in order to understand it. In doing that, Moslems are always guided by rationality in interpreting a sacred text and reconciling—without forcibleness—any apparent disagreement in it with reason, and are always assured that the *Sunna* is free from fabrication and corruption so long as its content is in agreement with the Koran. Though Islamic law, the *Shari’a* is immutable as prescribed in the Koran and the Prophet’s teachings, its interpretation by human beings through the instrumentality of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) is flexible and responsive to modern needs and problems (Boullata, 1990).

In politics and other matters relating to this world not dealt with in the Koran by a text and in detail, Moslems adjudicate personal opinion, their criterion being the public interest of the community and the avoidance of any possible harm to it. In doing that, they are always mindful of the general ethical ideals and universal principles laid down in the Koran.

According to Mohammed Amara, an Egyptian Islamic thinker, giving a religious character to politics and the system of government is an attempt totally

alien to the spirit of Islam. For Islam, in his view, distinguishes between the community of religion and the community of politics, the former being made up of Moslem believers, the latter of citizens of various faiths. This was clear from the example of the Islamic Constitution set by Prophet Mohammed, in which the Moslem believers were referred to as one *umma* (faithful community), and the Christians and Jews (known in Islam as people of the book) were included in the *umma* along with the believers (cited in Boullata, 1990).

Islam, as correctly understood from the Koran and the Prophet's teachings, is tolerant of Jews, Christians, and other non-Moslem believers. Boullata (1990) stressed that religious pluralism, which is accepted in the Koran, "is a fact that will remain with mankind challenging Moslems and other believers to compete for righteousness and good deeds and to cooperate with one another in brotherhood within the framework of national unity" (79).

Islam affirms the lay character of political authority and emphasizes its human quality insofar as assuming it depends on consultation with other humans, on selection and public acceptance by humans, and on the fact that the ruler is responsible to a community of humans. In Islam, the political authority rests with the people. Islam has not laid down a specific political order for Moslems because the logic of its being good for all times and places requires that this be left for the people to formulate and to change in accordance with the evolution of the human mind and the interest of the community, within the framework of the general commendations and universal principles of Islam, and in light of the experience of other civilizations.

## MISREPRESENTATION OF THE ARAB AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

Because nations that are not part of the Western world have cultures that are so different from Western culture, foreign cultures find themselves perceived as "the other," which opens the way for misinterpretation and possible hostility and antagonism. Presently, one of the major non-Western cultures analyzed and judged in this manner is the Islamic culture, which includes over one billion people throughout the world. Islamic culture presents concepts that might seem to be totally foreign to Western modes of thinking, such as the Moslem women having to wear the veil to cover their hair.

Arab and Islamic cultures have always been misinterpreted by the West. This misinterpretation has led to bias, misunderstanding, stereotyping, and sometimes hostility toward Islamic culture (Wiegand & Malek, 1997, 204). Most perceptions of Arabs today come not from real knowledge but from faulty and simplistic assumptions. Many Western journalists view the Arab World as "downright savage" trying to destroy the dynamic, democratic modern nation of Israel (Emery, 1995, 224).

The image of Islam in the West tends to be "totally foreign, almost sinister" (Diller, 1994, 170). This negative image of Islam has resulted from ignorance

about that religion, which is considered by many Westerners to be “exotic” and “strange.” Western hostility to Islam has historical roots. The Islamic people conquered and ruled parts of Europe and threatened the West for several centuries in the beginning of the second millennium. “The legacy of alienation germinated by the Islamic conquests and counter-conquests by the West was perpetuated in folk culture. . . . Later, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western industrialization and military strength spearheaded Western hegemony in much of the Islamic Middle East” (171). The revival of Islamic sentiment, represented in events such as the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the U.S. embassy hostage crisis of 1979–1981 contributed to the historically rooted Western fears of Islam (171).

The West does not seem to have done a very good job of understanding the religion and basic belief system of the Arabs. “The dread generated by the image of a virile, aggressive religion that spread its messages to the distant lands to create an empire, including vast areas of the globe, has been a part of the West’s psyche for over a thousand years. Western response often has been to demonize the Arabs and their religion” (Haque, 1997, 18). Edward Said (1981) pointed out that “for most of the Middle Ages and during the early part of the Renaissance in Europe, Islam was believed to be a demonic religion of apostasy, blasphemy, and obscurity” (4–5).

In the Western news media, Moslems have often been labeled as militants, terrorists or fundamentalists. “With abundant negative reporting and opinion in the Western media about Moslem fundamentalism, it is no wonder that Western society has come to believe that Islamic revivalism—and in a more general sense, Islamic culture—is a genuine threat to the survival of democracy” (Wiegand & Malek, 1997, 204).

Jack Shaheen (1984) identified four characteristics that dominate the Western media when it comes to the depiction of Arabs: the wealthy, oil-rich sheiks; the uncultured barbarians; the sex-maniac harem owners; and the ruthless Arab terrorists. These categories emerged from Shaheen’s research on more than 200 episodes of 100 television shows that featured Arab characters.

As described by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), Orientalists have perceived the Islamic world as illogical and irrational. These impressions are rooted in the power relationship that the West has maintained through domination of the Islamic world, leading to the popular notion that the Orient, which primarily encompasses the Islamic world, is inferior to the West.

The fear of Islam and Moslems is a major factor in the negative Arab image in the West, most specifically in the United States. This is the case since, in much of the writing about Arabs, there is confusion concerning Arabs and Moslems. Consequently, to many if not most Americans the terms “Arabs” and “Moslems” are interchangeable. Ignorance about, and negative images of, Islam are, therefore, readily transferable to Arabs (Wiegand & Malek, 1997).

At a fund-raiser for the city of Jerusalem in June 1992, CBS news anchorman Dan Rather was quoted as saying that “the most dangerous ideology is fundamental Muhammadism.” This biased comment made publicly by a prominent member of the news media strengthened the stereotypes held by Western societies about Islam (Wiegand & Malek, 1997, 205). In general, Western societies often have very little knowledge of the Middle East; hence, the constant barrage of disasters, coups, uprisings, conflicts, and terrorist activities, reported routinely by the Western news media, fosters a gross misimpression of Middle Eastern people and cultures. The Arab countries in the Middle East “are often lumped together as if they were a single entity devoid of any separate national identity, cultural heritage, religious ideology, political philosophy, or global sensitivity” (Kamalipour, 1997, xx).

The misrepresentation of Arab and Islamic culture in the Western news media has resulted directly from correspondents’ failure to become familiar with Arab and Islamic societies. Most of those correspondents who disseminate information about the Islamic world lack an in-depth understanding of the indigenous cultures of Arab and Islamic societies. It is impossible for a Western correspondent to grasp the various language patterns, customs, and traditions of a country like Egypt by being on location in Cairo for just a few days or weeks (Wiegand & Malek, 1997).

Because it is the elite classes, and not necessarily the ordinary people in Arab countries who speak English, Western journalists are limited in where they can obtain information. For example, Egypt’s political elites are products of Western education and high urbanization (Cohen, 1990, 20). Moreover, “the Western journalist is often afraid of the common man and woman who symbolizes a lifestyle that is the polar opposite of the Western ideal’s sanctity for individual life” (Wiegand & Malek, 1997, 210). Thus, it is the highly secular, Western-influenced ruling classes of Arab and Islamic nations who most often relate information about the people of their countries to the Western news media. “Perception of Islamic culture through the restricted spectacles of Western cultural values hinders amiable relations between the West and the Islamic world, leaving the potential that bipolar cultural warfare will escalate” (Wiegand & Malek, 1997, 211).

The essential problem of misrepresenting Arabs in the Western news media has less to do with the shifting images in the Western media than for the Arabs’ inability to project their own image. As Boullata (1990) affirms, “the Arab crisis is more internal than external. Most—if not all—Arab thinkers are unhappy with the present conditions of the Arab World” (139). The challenge of the Western media and cultural bias are only part of the demand by Arabs for change, for legitimation.

Of course, Arabs’ lack of awareness of Western sensitivities and lack of understanding of the modern public relations techniques needed to work with the Western news media have always presented a problem. But the inability or sometimes the unwillingness of the Western media to admit that they were of-

ten dealing in stereotypes of the worst kind have made effective cross-cultural communication between the Moslem and the Western worlds nearly impossible.

### STILL, SOME BALANCE IN THE WESTERN MEDIA COVERAGE

Not all Western journalists have presented the Arab side of the Arab-Israeli conflict in a negative way. Some programs and television documentaries produced by American journalists were successful in presenting a more balanced picture of the conflict. One of these documentaries was aired on PBS in 1975. The seven-part documentary series *Arabs and Israelis* examined the prospects for peace in the Middle East. Those interviewed spoke not of war, but of a possible peace. One Israeli interviewee said he hoped that the Israelis would recognize the PLO and the national rights of the Palestinian people. The issue at hand, he said, has been and remains “the struggle between two rights.” The executive producer of this series said, “We have not tried to cover all aspects of the conflict or review the history of the Middle East, to suggest who is right or wrong . . . We listen instead for softer voices, those that may be easily drowned out but are no less important to hear” (Shaheen, 1984, 93).

Another documentary that presented a balanced point of view of the Arab-Israeli conflict was *Israel and the Palestinians: Will Reason Prevail?* The documentary, which aired on PBS in January 1981, interviewed spokesmen from the two sides of the conflict. The documentary’s producer showed viewers some harsh measures that the Israelis had taken against West Bank Palestinians; and the producer discussed Israeli press censorship with editors of a Palestinian newspaper. The documentary concluded with an appeal for a mutual recognition of rights. The program’s announcer said that Israel must “recognize that Palestinians are not simply ‘terrorists,’ that they are doctors, lawyers, and engineers who, like their neighboring Jews, believe they have an historical right to a homeland.” Likewise, he said, “Palestinians must recognize that Israel has a right to exist as a nation. . . . Only then, when both Israelis and Palestinians begin addressing each other’s legitimate concerns will progress be made towards a settlement.”

Shaheen (1984) said of the two documentaries that they are “a kind of candle sputtering bravely in the darkness . . . The candle reveals a humanity that television all too often denies viewers . . . The series makes us feel. It makes the ordinary tears of others become our own” (94).

There are other Western-produced documentaries that were a fair presentation of the Middle East conflict. Some of these documentaries were broadcast on special news shows such as CBS’s *60 Minutes* and CBS *Reports*, PBS’s *World*, and ABC’s *20/20*.

## A MORE POSITIVE IMAGE OF THE PALESTINIANS AFTER THE OSLO ACCORD

In 1993, Yasser Arafat, the PLO leader, and Yitzhak Rabin, the late Israeli prime minister, were selected as *Time* magazine's "Men of the Year." Their recognition followed the historic signing of the Israeli–PLO accord on September 13, 1993. The Palestinian leader, like others before him, has not always enjoyed such favorable coverage. His image has often been associated in the Western media with terrorism, violence, and ruthless behavior. For example, a political cartoon that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1990 under the theme "brotherhood of terrorists" depicted Arafat standing alongside Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Libyan President Moammar Qaddafi with the comment: "The Three Stooges of the Apocalypse."

In the course of reporting the Middle East conflict, the Palestinian image has undergone radical transformation, moving from invisibility to high visibility. Western reporting of the Palestinians has transformed then from faceless victims to faces of violence to, now, faces of peace (Zaharna, 1997).

In the early days of their conflict with the Israelis, the Palestinians were often presented by the Western news media as unskilled and leaderless. The image of the masses of Palestinian refugees and their unresolved plight reinforced this impotent image. In contrast to this victim image, the 1970s witnessed the rise of an entirely opposite image—the Palestinian "terrorist" equipped with nothing more complex than guns, dynamite, and airline schedules. The term *fedayeen* was often used but rarely translated. This added to the mysteriousness and deviousness of the Palestinian groups. *Fedayeen* means "freedom fighters" (Zaharna, 1997).

While the main goal of the Palestinians according to Zaharna (1997) was to gain international awareness of their plight for independence, they were viewed as "dedicated, vicious political fanatics and unpredictable terrorists" (45). However, the September 1993 signing of the Israeli–PLO peace agreement was not only a diplomatic breakthrough but a breakthrough for the Palestinian image in the American media. "In terms of media images, the PLO became its people's representative not in 1974 when it received international recognition, but when it was able to align itself with the Israeli leaders in 1993. Hence, the merging of the Palestinian leadership with the [Western] people came not through the PLO identifying with its own people but through being identified with its enemy, the Israelis" (46).

The Oslo accords helped replace the "conflict" theme with the "togetherness" theme between the principal parties. According to an article in the September 20, 1993, issue of *Time* magazine cited by Zaharna, "Israelis and Palestinians . . . Arafat and Rabin . . . side by side . . . can share the land they both call home . . . these two can live . . . the two are emerging from the clutches of history . . . creating their own choices . . . the two could build their promised lands . . . they are now free to live with each other" (32–33). This theme was visually reinforced on the cover of this issue which showed the Is-

raeli and the Palestinian leaders, and had an opening picture of an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian woman sitting on a wall. As the theme continued after the signing of the Oslo accords, a sense of mutuality emerged that had been mostly missing from past reporting. The September 20, 1993, issue reported that “Israelis and Palestinians embrace . . . enemies who could not live together . . . neither Israel nor the PLO can destroy each other . . . Israelis and Palestinians now . . . attempt to live side by side . . . both have what it takes” (34–39).

### **WHY CAN REALITY ABOUT THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT BE DISTORTED BY THE U.S. MEDIA?**

Too much emphasis is placed on the question of a pro-Israel or pro-Arab bias in the American news media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict. A more balanced analysis should consider the inherent difficulties in the media’s coverage of the complex Middle East conflict. These difficulties can be categorized into four groups: operational media realities, the “translation” of Middle Eastern issues into American terms, the unique regional dimension of the conflict, in which a democracy is pitted against nondemocratic states, and personal biases of reporters.

#### **The Media Reality**

Professional and financial constraints of the media are enormously significant. Of these, the time factor is most important. Hours and days of research are condensed into one and a half minutes. In this process, much of the accuracy and most of the complexity of the Middle East conflict can be lost.

The competitive nature of American newsmaking must also be considered. While Middle East analysts may prefer to discuss current regional developments, broadcast executives are almost solely concerned with ratings and the type of coverage that will best serve the ratings. Media coverage of the Middle East today is a profit-making venture, governed by the rules of such undertakings.

Another significant aspect of the media reality is the nature of foreign journalism in Israel. Israel hosts approximately 250 foreign correspondents—the third largest press contingent in the world. Given the rotative nature of newspaper work, many of these correspondents know little of the Middle East region, lack any skills in Hebrew (the official language of Israel), and may have acquired other expertise in different capacities in the past. Nevertheless, in the eyes of editors, viewers, and readers back home, that correspondent is an automatic expert on Israel (Savir, 1985, 32).

#### **The American Reality**

An inherent dilemma lies at the root of Middle East reporting. For American television and newspaper editors, the Middle East, and Israel in particular,

are popular issues that “sell” well. At the same time, however, the conflict is complex and deep-rooted, almost to the point of being inexplicable to viewers and readers.

In attempting to resolve this dilemma, editors translate these difficult issues into terms that are comprehensible to the 17 million viewers of an evening news broadcast or the one million readers of a morning newspaper. In the process, a new pattern of coverage is created. For example, in dealing with Israeli-Arab relations, American journalists often resort to terminology from the lexicon of American Black-White relations. Here, the differences outweigh any similarities.

A second typical approach is the search for a human interest angle. When an American reporter reduces the Arab-Israeli conflict to the story of one Israeli (often a soldier) and one Arab (often a refugee), the underlying premise is that the human interest story represents the real story. However, at best, it is only a real story. This reductive process leads to serious confusion between hard and soft news.

A third discernible pattern in American reporting is the constant search for a simple solution to the conflict. Americans take the approach that everything is solvable because in America, fortunately, most problems are. In the Middle East, however, most problems are not. It is therefore futile and, indeed, misleading for the major newspapers to continuously endeavor to “solve” the Middle East conflict on their Op-Ed pages.

### **The Middle East Reality**

The unique nature of the Middle East conflict (being a regional conflict between a democracy and nondemocratic states that is covered so extensively) governs the results in terms of coverage. The discrepancy of accessibility results in asymmetrical coverage. Thus, Israel is overexposed. The prime minister and foreign minister of Israel are household names, but the prime ministers or presidents of Jordan, Syria, and even Egypt are largely unknown.

The Arab world’s political reality is rarely exposed. It is portrayed as a homogeneous entity, while it is, in fact, a heterogeneous group of 21 states with competing interests. Inter-Arab conflicts are key factors in Middle East stability—or instability. However, most Western viewers and readers remain ignorant of these salient elements because they are covered so little.

### **Personal Biases**

The emotional underpinnings of the Middle East conflict render objectivity in reporting difficult. Many journalists who cover the Middle East for any length of time invariably develop a predilection for one side or the other. The result is a relatively “mixed bag” of pro-Israel or pro-Arab leanings.

Generalizations are facile when it comes to journalistic bias. The only safe observation is that, when the objective, aforementioned patterns of coverage create a slant, some journalists will express their personal bias more freely. A

fair-minded analysis of the American media's treatment of the Middle East will seek to address seriously the inherent problems. Admittedly, though, the fundamental aspects of the problems will remain unchanged (Savir, 1985, 32).

### **PREJUDICES BY THE ARABS AND THE ISRAELIS**

Throughout the course of their conflict, both the Arabs and the Israelis have themselves brought their own prejudices and negative stereotypes to bear on each other. For the Israelis, the most prevalent stereotype of Arabs is "the fearsome violent figure of immense strength and duplicity . . . Capable of great cruelty, given to fanatical disregard for human life, he murders easily, either out of a crazed lust for blood or as an emotional animal easily incited and manipulated by murderous leaders" (Bickerton & Klausner, 1998, 5).

Arabs also hold negative stereotypes of Jews. "Arabs regard Jews as violent aliens, as outsiders, as interlopers who do not belong" (Bickerton & Klausner, 1998, 6). These prejudices and stereotypes contribute to the intensity of antagonistic passions of the participants in the Middle East conflict. Many Arabs also do not distinguish between Jews and Israelis. For them, any Jewish person is an Israeli. In this context, Block (2000) said,

There is a discourse you could qualify as racist against the Jews. This occurs because when the Israeli army comes to the occupied territories and says, we are doing this in the name of Judaism, it is very difficult for the victim to make the distinction (between Jews and Israelis). (B13)

### **REMEDIES TO THE DISTORTED MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT**

A major reason for the misperception of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Western news media and the distorted coverage of that conflict by Western reporters is the lack of a comprehensive understanding of Middle Eastern cultures and values. It is important to understand cultural values in cross-cultural communication because they serve as multifaceted standards that guide human conduct in a variety of ways.

#### **Values**

Values can be defined as "the most deep-seated aspects of culture and often cause the greatest cultural conflict when they impede upon cultural communication. They lead to behavior which seems irrational to those who do not share the same values" (Prosser, 1978, 303).

Individuals use values to determine what is aesthetically pleasing, morally or ethically acceptable, fair, or just. The values that an individual's life is governed by are those that are embedded in a culture. He or she internalizes them in the process of acculturation. "Beyond the individual, cultural values originate with

laws, moral and ethical principles of the society that provide the basic criteria for evaluation of the preferred mode of conduct or existence” (Haque, 1997, 21).

Value orientations are the deepest but most visible aspects of a culture. They are the dominant ways in which members of a culture operate toward certain basic human problems, such as the role of humans in nature, their place in it, their relations to other humans, their use and relations to time and space, and their orientation toward activity. “Some values and normative systems are shared broadly throughout the world, as suggested by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Others are culturally specific and provide an opportunity to apply the standard of differences in the principle of similarities and differences. Still others are peculiar expressions or deviations of individuals within cultures. These are called aspects of subjective culture” (Prosser, 1978, 175).

Values are central to a comparative understanding of people and cross-cultural communication. Values are needed to rationalize actions taken by both individuals and nations. Very often, aggressive actions taken by a nation are rationalized in terms of values. Moreover, values are basic to a culture because they provide a framework for evaluating what is desirable or undesirable, admirable or despicable, in life and in society. It is through cultural communication that values are passed on within the culture and are shared with others in other cultural settings.

### **Ethnocentrism**

One of the greatest problems of communication across cultures and of studying values and religions is ethnocentrism. According to Prosser (1978), “Ethnocentrism is the tendency of members of a culture to believe that for one reason or another their culture is better or superior to other cultures” (297). Ethnocentric individuals seek to hold on to their most deep-seated cultural patterns.

Americans historically have often been very ethnocentric in judging Middle Easterners and consequently have failed to understand the dynamics of Middle Eastern culture. Many Americans think that their national cultural characteristics are so extraordinary that all foreigners wish to become Americans or to adopt American customs. The remedy to this way of thinking perhaps lies in what might be called cultural relativism, a concept that emphasizes the need to study values of other people within the framework of their culture, not one’s own (Haque, 1997).

### **Balance between Arab and Israeli Viewpoints**

Another reason for the misperception of the conflict in the Western media is the imbalance in the coverage of Israeli and Arab viewpoints. A possible remedy to that problem is that news producers should insist that when interviews

are done, there be a true balance between Arab and Israeli viewpoints. We have to recognize that even with these remedies, there will always be some of the coverage that is not liked by either the Arab side or the Israeli side. This is because “one man’s context is another man’s distortion” (Savir, 1985, 32).

## CONCLUSION

As was discussed in this chapter, the prevalent stereotypes that distort the political, cultural, and social realities of the Middle East will continue to color the perceptions of Western journalists about this region unless those journalists try to understand more about this complex part of the world.

A comprehensive understanding of the religions and cultures of that region by providing a shared communication and other social interaction would enable Western journalists to have an insightful perception of Middle Eastern cultures. Understanding might not overcome opposing interests, but the differences at least will be clearer and more subject to discourse, negotiation, and compromise where possible.

In the next chapter, I present a detailed discussion of the Israeli and Egyptian cultures, including languages, religions, and social norms and values in the two countries.

# 4

---

## THE ISRAELI AND EGYPTIAN CULTURES: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Virtually any definition of culture, in the commonly used sense, would include such things as academic institutions, literature, the arts, theater, music, and so forth. A society is said to have a cultural life when it has such institutions, or amenities, and they are lively and in constant, popular use.

Culture is more fundamental than that, however. "It is not necessarily expressed in concrete institutions. It includes the deep-rooted and basic mores, beliefs, social customs, and notions about the home and the world" (Yael, 1998, 71).

In the shrinking world of the information age, with a variety of means of communication growing at an explosive rate, people are increasingly communicating cross-culturally at various levels. Unless people, communicating across cultures, find a way to enter into each other's assumptive worlds that are governed by the basic norms of human relations in a culture, contacts may only enhance misunderstanding and aggravate existing prejudices. It has been suggested that books on a culture may offer profound discourses on its history, religion, politics, music, sculpture, industry, and so forth; yet they may not give us the basic insight into what makes a person growing up in a culture behave in a certain way.

Despite differences, cultures and subcultures share characteristics that have been called "cultural universals." There are some who emphasize the universality of cultural patterns and supposedly assume "a psychic unity of humankind, a unity rooted in the basic similarity of the psychic structure of human

beings, regardless of the differences in response to environmental stimuli reflected in different modes of behavior” (Haque, 1997, 18).

## **CULTURAL UNIVERSALS (DIALOGUE) VERSUS CULTURAL RELATIVISM (CRITICISM)**

Two major trends have contributed to our understanding of different cultures in the realm of intercultural communication. They are cultural dialogists and cultural critics.

### **Cultural Universals (Dialogists)**

Cultural dialogists believe that in order to understand different cultures, scholars should focus on sets of components that they select as cultural universals. According to Prosser (1978), “cultural universals are those characteristics which are shared from culture to culture, past and present, such as customs relating to cycles of life: birth, adolescence, courtship, marriage, maturation, and death; bodily care; relations with others; and customs relating to the supernatural” (296). One may assume that the more comprehensive a list of components one uses, the more thorough and deep one’s examination of culture is and, consequently, the more reliable one’s understanding is likely to be.

Cultural universals link humanity more by their similarities than by their differences. Such an assumption requires us to reexamine all cultural systems as actually or potentially open rather than closed systems, in which there is a constant interchange of customs and values.

Anthropologists in the early post–World War II era began developing the concept of cultural universals, or cultural traits, common to all cultures, past and present, whether or not contact with other cultures was involved. Such traits were seen as categories relating to doing and thinking that could be applied in all locations and time periods for all people (Prosser, 1978).

Cultural dialogists have focused on the possibilities of research into human culture and the differences it makes in how humans communicate with one another. They have sought to illuminate the realm of self-presentation and enlarge the human perspective to understand the culturally different. Argument, belief, values, structures, and poetics were considered basic branches of dialogue. The dialogists’ work “emerged not from concentrated study of the phenomenon of humans interacting across cultures, but rather from the application of rhetorical or symbolic categories to intercultural behavior” (Asante, Newmark, & Blake, 1979, 18).

### **Cultural Relativism (Critics)**

Unlike cultural dialogists who focus on cultural universals and similarities, cultural critics are more likely to see distinctions between cultures on a com-

parative basis. Instead of seeking to broaden the work of cultural dialogists, the cultural critics have left off process to argue for understanding the barriers that separate men.

Cultural critics operate on three distinct levels: classificatory, analytic, and applicative. At the classificatory level, the researcher attempts to identify the “barriers” to communication across cultures; at the analytic level, he or she explores the barriers in terms of priority, intensity, or difficulty. When the cultural critic has made the classification and analysis, application to specific settings becomes possible; this level is called applicative.

Cultural critics are seeking ways to perfect the communication process across cultures by isolating the barriers. They suggest “sensitizing persons to the kinds of things that need to be taken into account instead of developing behavior and attitude stereotypes, mainly because of the individual differences in each encounter and the rapid changes that occur in a culture pattern” (Asante, Newmark, & Blake, 1979, 20).

### **Integrating Cultural Universals and Cultural Relativism**

I believe that analyzing the Israeli and Egyptian cultures requires using both cultural universals and cultural relativism approaches in the sense that I am comparing the two cultures in terms of their similarities and their differences. In this context, Prosser (1978) said: “It is useful for us to understand how social discourse interculturally and crossculturally can be made more workable by understanding in the principle of similarities and differences those things that help to unite us and bring us together” (166). Despite the importance of an understanding of cultural universals, we should have a critical approach to such universals.

In this chapter, I recognize the infinitely complex nature of the Israeli and the Egyptian cultures and attempt to examine only a few components of cultural universals in both cultures that are needed to have an insight into their dynamics and the distinctions between them.

Understanding the cultural dynamics of the Israeli and the Egyptian societies is essential for understanding how the two countries shape their policies with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is because politics, including the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, is very much a cultural activity. Political culture defines the value parameters for both the policy makers and the bureaucrats who are responsible for the implementation of the policy. Therefore, the external behavior of international actors cannot be gainfully examined without a comprehensive understanding of their domestic cultural values.

### **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ISRAEL AND EGYPT**

The conflict between Israel and the Arab countries is not limited to the political and military areas; it also includes the cultural differences between the

Arabs and Israel. In fact, it might be assumed that these cultural differences have contributed to the further complication of the political conflict in the Middle East. These cultural differences are very clear between the two key countries in this conflict: Egypt and Israel.

To the outsider, Egypt and Israel might seem to have more cultural features in common than in opposition. "They are ancient 'semitic' peoples worshipping in sister religions, Judaism and Islam. Their faiths share many common features: the one God reveals his word to his prophet as recounted in a sacred text—in the one case the Koran, in the other the five books of Moses" (Cohen, 1990, 19). "Early Judaic and Islamic communities were politically organized as nations of believers invoking special divine protection and in pursuit of earthly as well as spiritual salvation" (Kerr, 1973, 29).

Despite these points of similarity, profound differences exist between the Egyptian and Israeli cultures. On the one hand, Egypt, one of the world's oldest nation-states with a history of seven thousand years, is a relatively homogeneous society with a long history, self-sufficient culture, and large mass of people deeply rooted in the village life flourishing along the banks of the Nile. On the other hand, Israel is a modern nation-state with a heterogeneous population of immigrants from many lands who live in largely Western settings.

Religion and language in the two countries perform opposing national functions. Whereas Judaism and Hebrew (Israel's official language) have perpetuated Jewish separateness and its sense of nationhood, Islam and Arabic (Egypt's official language) direct Egypt outward first to the wider Arab nation and then to the vast community of faithful, "the *umma*."

Egypt and Israel suffer from a very high degree of cultural incompatibility. Each culture is virtually a closed book to the other. "Imprisoned in mutually exclusive conceptual worlds and complex ecologies of assumption and habit, neither society is able to bridge the gap dividing it from the way of life of its neighbor" (Cohen, 1990, 161).

In many respects, the Egyptian-Israeli conflict is a paradigm of a relationship that "became hopelessly entangled in the snares of cross-cultural dissonance" (9). At the heart of this conflict is a recurrent pattern of cultural misunderstanding and failed communication.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EGYPTIAN CULTURE

Egypt has always been described as "an age-old hydraulic society," with a highly centralized government and an army ready to resolve conflicts among political, economic, and ideological forces (Wilber, 1969, 1).

The core of Egypt's cultural scene is the village community. "The ineradicable natural heritage of the Egyptian people is a joint struggle for subsistence" (Cohen, 1990, 21). Most of Egypt consists of desert, and most of its settlements appear along the banks of the Nile River. In this agricultural society, the sense of group solidarity has always been very strong. Therefore, "the develop-

ment of personal initiative and autonomy, characteristic of child-rearing and education in the Western world, is neglected by Egyptian culture, as it is indeed throughout the Arab world” (22).

“The cradle of Egypt’s collectivist culture is the village community” (Cohen, 1990, 19). For over four thousand years of uninterrupted settlement, the vast majority of the Egyptian people have lived in the thousands of villages of the Nile Valley and Delta. Today, much has changed. Millions of Egyptians are still tied to the soil, but up to 40 percent of the population now lives in cities, and migration from countryside to town continues. Since the 1870s, Egyptian society has undergone a transformation with the emergence of working and middle classes. For many, modern education has eroded the traditional village characteristics (20). In recent years, Egyptian society has started to witness a wave of urbanization, where many villagers have moved to major cosmopolitan cities, especially Cairo. Villagers are naturally attracted to the cities by prospects of employment and prosperity (whether illusory or realistic). Rapid population growth, diminishing resources, lack of development in rural areas, the absence of new cultivable land, and the great disparities in land distribution have also served to draw people out of the villages.

Although the majority of Egyptians lived in villages as recently as the late 1980s, cities, which have been important in Egypt for more than two thousand years, continued to be important. Traditional urban society was more heterogeneous than in most other areas of the Middle East. Quarters, segregated along religious and occupational lines, were self-governing in their internal affairs (Metz, 1991, 114). “Although the physical hold of the village may have weakened, Egyptian culture still retains the indelible mark of its origins.” Anwar Sadat, like his successor Hosni Mubarak, was village born and bred; Gamal Abdel Nasser also came from a village background. Thus, “there is no unbridgeable cultural gap between ruler and ruled; both draw on a common fund of symbols and experiences” (20).

Although Egypt is commonly identified by its own people and others as an “Arab” country, its unique village culture distinguishes it from other Arab nations. “There is a specific quality about Egyptian life, a distinctiveness which has its roots in a pattern of existence in the Nile Valley long antedating the rise of Arab Islam. While Egypt shares much with its Middle Eastern neighbors, it remains uniquely Egyptian” (Wilber, 1969, 2). “Islam, with its ‘capacity for accepting Nature,’ had no radical impact on a culture which promoted the continuity of village life and fused successive and heterogeneous systems in a syncretic whole, where the group was both agent and beneficiary” (Cohen, 1990, 21).

Despite Egypt’s unique character in the Arab world, the majority of Egyptian citizens view themselves, and are viewed by outsiders, as Arabs. Their sense of Arab nationhood and belonging is based on what they have in common with the rest of the Arab countries’ citizens—namely, language, culture, sociopolitical experiences, economic interests, and a collective memory of

their place and role in history. “This sense of nationhood is constantly being formed and reformed, reflecting changing conditions and self-conceptions” (Barakat, 1993, 33).

The “law of assimilation” decrees that many invaders throughout the course of history who have come out of either the desert or the sea—Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and Turks who settled along the banks of the Nile—have been entirely absorbed into the Egyptian indigenous population and its long culture. Foreign conquest and occupation has had some effect on the Egyptian culture and society. However, many of the failings of the Egyptian government are blamed on previous colonial oppression. “Egyptians have also been left with an acute sensitivity to any real or apparent encroachment on their sovereignty. Proud of the antiquity and grandeur of their civilization and its centrality in the Arab World, they regard Egypt as a great power by right and bitterly resent any insinuation of subordinate status” (Barakat, 1993, 21).

The need for irrigation and unified water control along the Nile has led to group solidarity in Egyptian villages. “The villages are basically self-contained and self-reliant units, inhabited for centuries by the same kin groups, made up of people who are somewhat suspicious of outsiders. The dreary round of drudgery, lived out in hovels at a subsistence level, has been relieved primarily by group participation in marriages and funerals and in religious ceremonies” (Wilber, 1969, 4). The notion of group solidarity was initiated by late President Nasser, who called for family, village, and ethnic unity and idealized the role of the Egyptian peasant (*fellah*) as an “embodiment of the new Egypt” (7).

The Egyptian village contains several extended families (*ahl* or *dar*), each of which has a lineage or clan (*hamula*) relationship. In addition, there are secondary divisions of these families into social groups that are usually descendants of a common male ancestor. “The basic kinship unit among peasants in villages is the extended family rather than the tribe. The family structure is based on a web of relations centered on land cultivation. As such, it constitutes the basic socioeconomic unit in the villages” (Barakat, 1993, 56).

The necessities of village life have created a culture in which the individual is bound to the group by strong ties of rights and obligations ingrained from early childhood. “Complete mutual interdependence is the rule. One must help one’s kinsmen, not only with mundane tasks in the home and fields, but in time of deeper need, such as illness, debt or strife with outsiders” (Cohen, 1990, 23).

One important value in the Egyptian village culture is a sense of belonging to the home, which, like the land, is a symbol of identity that must be maintained and never sold or rented. Another important value in village culture is motherhood, which, like the land, symbolizes fertility and unlimited generosity. Other village values include brotherhood, marriage, children, obedience, patience, spontaneity, simplicity, cooperation, and neighborliness. Peasants may engage in intensive rivalries and feuds when land or family values are

threatened. Yet peasant culture is also distinguished by its emphasis on neighborliness as a significant value. This emphasis is reflected in often repeated proverbs such as “*Al-jar qabl ad-darr*” (The neighbor before the homefolk).

Community affiliation is given priority over individual achievement and power in Egyptian society. Indeed, *najda* (mutual support) is a critical concept in the Egyptian villagers’ value system. This emphasis on helping the group—held together by informal ties—also explains the dominance of informal over contractual commitments, and the use of mediation and reconciliation to resolve conflicts in lieu of reliance on formal legal action. Disputes in Egyptian rural communities are often resolved informally and outside the official courts, according to customary law.

Village life in Egypt accords a significant role to clerics but is structured primarily around popular or folk religion. “Many of the religious values of peasants derive from their immediate environment rather than from texts and religious institutions or establishments, and from concrete expressions of faith rather than from abstract philosophical notions” (Barakat, 1993, 59). Their deep religiousness centers on saints, shrines, and rituals. It serves as a mechanism for relating to (even controlling) their environment, and for overcoming daily problems. Villagers still follow the *shari’a* (Islamic law), but they tend to develop among themselves a pattern of religious life that interprets religious texts symbolically. They use concrete experience to support abstract religious teachings. They listen to *ulama* (religious clerics), but they use their *awlia* (saints) to help them understand and interpret what the *ulama* are saying. Among the most dominant folk religious values in the Egyptian villages is *baraka* (blessedness), which emanates from dependence on seasonal harvests and direct exposure to environmental forces. Closely connected to this orientation are devotion, patience, reverence, and contentment.

Like other collectivist or communitarian cultures, Egyptian society is preoccupied with questions of shame. In the context where group power is paramount, group opinion is decisive and inescapable. The weapon of shaming is one of the group’s major means of social control. “Loss of face, to be shamed before one’s peers, is an excruciating penalty which one seeks to avoid at all costs . . . Punishment is administered in public and intensified by deliberate belittlement or ridicule. The humiliation is worse than the pain of the admonition itself” (Barakat, 1993, 23). In this context, Wilber (1969) said: “It is shameful [for Egyptians] to acknowledge failure, but almost as much to rejoice over success” (10).

The effect of punishment is not simply to discourage misbehavior as such but to disgrace the person in front of the group. The child is taught that the penalty for wrongdoing is public disgrace rather than a sense of personal remorse. Therefore, he or she tries to avoid humiliation as much as sin. The corollary of shame is face or honor, that is, one’s reputation in the eyes of others. A pivotal concept throughout the Arab world, honor embraces various forms

and may be associated with personal dignity, hospitality, the fathering of sons and the sexual virtue of one's women.

The Egyptian culture, in common with other Arab cultures, has developed an exquisite code of good manners, including the virtues of sociability, hospitality, and politeness. Social distinctions based on age, rank, or family position and other etiquette requirements are highly and strictly observed. In the Egyptian culture, "rudeness, not 'insincerity' is condemned. There is no conceivable virtue in bad manners. To protect everyone's feelings, differences must on no account be openly expressed; bluntness and undignified behavior are anathema" (Cohen, 1990, 27).

Every social situation has its own set of social conventions and etiquette. Hospitality in receiving a visitor is highly regulated. Egyptians possess a very strong sense of propriety. "Within the family circle, reserve, not effusiveness, is the rule" (Cohen, 1990, 26). A husband and wife will not openly display affection in public. A guest must always be received with a smiling face, regardless of one's mood, because any sign of unease will be taken personally by the visitor. "To spare others' feelings, to avoid embarrassment at all costs, requires the rigorous censorship of gratuitous emotions" (26).

As mentioned previously, family is the basic unit of social organization in traditional and contemporary Egyptian society. At the center of social and economic activities, it is a relatively cohesive social institution, particularly among the rural peasants. The success or failure of an individual member becomes that of the family as a whole. Every member of the family may be held responsible for the acts of every other member.

One's commitment to the family may involve considerable self-denial. Parents, and particularly the mother, deny themselves for the sake of their children. The source of the mother's happiness is the happiness and prosperity of her children. Ideally, both children and parents are totally committed to the family itself.

The centrality of the family as a basic socioeconomic unit in the Egyptian society is being increasingly challenged by the state and other social institutions. Young men and women are seeking education and careers away from their parents in urban centers within and outside Egypt. These structural changes have already begun to undermine traditional relationships, roles, and value orientations within the Arab family. Different sets of relationships are developing between family and society. However, "young men and women show less alienation from the family than from any other social institution, be it religious, political, or social" (Barakat, 1993, 100).

Islam plays a vital role in formulating Egypt's cultural values. The overwhelming majority of Egyptians are Moslems of the Sunnite rite, the largest of the Islamic groups. Egyptian Moslems follow the teachings of the Islamic *Shari'a*, which stresses the values of justice, fairness, equality, human dignity, and inviolability of person and property. The visitor to Egypt is immediately struck by the profusion of mosques and the large numbers of people visiting

them at all hours of the day. Islam is also being taught as a mandatory subject at Egyptian national schools from grade school to high school.

One force working to strengthen the religious tradition in Egypt is al-Azhar University. The “Grand Sheikh” of the university hands down rulings on interpretations of the faith and is now virtually a government appointee. He is, therefore, not likely to be a man who would embarrass the secular authorities, who, respecting the strength of the Islamic tradition, are not disposed to interfere in the religious decisions made by the “Grand Sheikh” and his colleagues at al-Azhar.

The Moslem Brotherhood, which was founded in 1928 to promote religious piety, is one of the main Islamic groups in Egypt. The Moslem Brotherhood claims that Egypt’s legislation, the judiciary, and economic and social systems are founded on non-Islamic bases. The group’s main objective is “to institute Islamic *Shari’a* as the controlling basis of state and society in Egypt” (El-Hodaiby, 2000, 88).

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the growth of popular interest in various forms of Islamic revival, accompanied by a local resistance to Western fashions, lifestyles, and modes of thought. “The label Western ‘imported ideas’ became a common expression of disapproval, and rationalist interpretations of Islam were often stigmatized as irreligious innovations” (Andersen, Siebert & Wagner, 1998, 27). The failure of modernizing secular policies to deal with internal social and economic problems and the “humiliating” defeat by Israel in the 1967 war were interpreted by some Moslems as a “divine punishment” (157). Today, the *Gamaa Islamiya* (Islamic group), an offshoot of the Moslem Brotherhood, continues to initiate widespread popular discontent against the West and to call for a return to the Islamic roots (Diller, 1994, 208).

Egypt has a Christian minority named “Copts,” who represent a small portion of the Egyptian population. In my view, the Copts, who claim to be descendants of the ancient Egyptians, are well-assimilated in the Egyptian community. They hold top positions in the Egyptian government, and they represent Egypt in international arenas as consuls and ambassadors. However, many Egyptian Copts do not believe that they enjoy the same rights as the Egyptian Moslems. In fact, many of them think they are being treated as outsiders in Egyptian society.

Interaction with other cultures is an important factor of change in the Egyptian culture. Currently, Egypt is witnessing two reactions to their political and cultural encounters with the Western world. First, there is a total rejection of this world, accompanied in general with an absolute acceptance of and adherence to the Egyptian culture, which in this case becomes hegemonic and totalitarian for its own people. The group supporting that reaction represents a major portion of the Egyptian society. And, at the same time, there is total acceptance of Western culture and partial rejection of some aspects of Egyptian culture. The group representing that reaction are generally the younger gener-

ations who have been exposed to Western values through satellite dishes and other Western media, such as music, movies, books, and so on.

I cannot discuss the Egyptian culture without referring to what many scholars call “the conspiracy theory.” In Egypt, as is the case in other Arab and Islamic countries, there is a general thinking among “average” individuals that the West is conspiring against the Arab and Islamic world, and that there is a major “Zionist” plot planned by the United States and Israel to stop any kind of development in Arab and Islamic countries. For those individuals, almost anything negative that happens on the political scene, or even the social and cultural scenes, would be a conspiracy plotted by the United States and Israel, which is described by those individuals as “America’s pampered child” in the Middle East. These misguided understandings under the unfounded theory of international conspiracy have the potential to deepen antagonism between the Arab world and Israel.

This cultural overview of Egyptian society shows that Egypt is a collective society that rests on group solidarity, and that the Egyptian people adhere to a set of social norms and cultural values that govern their personal and social relationships. The basic value orientations in Egyptian peasant culture pertain directly to land, family, the local community, and religion. Egyptian values, most of which come from Islam, might make it harder for an outsider, especially one coming from the West, to have an in-depth understanding of Egyptian society and its people.

Based on what has been presented in this section and considering the conservative nature of Egyptian society and religious resistance to Western influence, it can be hypothesized that Western correspondents operating in Egypt might not be able to cope with Egyptian culture or mingle easily with its people.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE ISRAELI CULTURE

Israeli society is “a human improvisation patched together from amidst the debris of the shattered empires of the twentieth century with immigrants from as many countries as had Jewish communities” (Cohen, 1990, 28). Like the United States, Israel was founded by immigrants from many ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Israel has encouraged this “ingathering” of Jews to help develop the Israeli society. “This drawing-together is the essence of Zionism, which might be called ‘the founding religion’ of Israel” (Diller, 1994, 20).

The secular Israeli society is an “artificial creation,” and the establishment of Hebrew as the spoken and written language dates back only to the first decades of the twentieth century. The parents of most native-born Israeli adults did not themselves speak Hebrew as their first language. This puts Israel in the category of immigrant countries. Israeli society as a whole “remains a hotch-potch, a strange kaleidoscope, consisting of many pieces which move against one another in various combinations, but do not mesh into a recogniz-

able entity. The recent massive Russian immigration and the influx of foreign workers are shaking up the pieces some more” (Yael, 1998, 71).

Powerful mechanisms of socialization were established to absorb the new immigrants into Israeli society and help them adjust to prevailing cultural patterns. First among these mechanisms was an educational system that aimed at socializing new immigrants to the dominant values by helping them learn the language, norms, and appropriate social roles. There is popular agreement in Israel that schools should instill in youth sufficient knowledge of Jewish people and commitment to Jewish traditions. Among the major educational goals set by the government are “deepening one’s civil responsibilities toward the state, preparing young generations for pioneering tasks, implanting a love for the national tradition and enhancing the recognition of the mutual and ultimate interdependence of the State of Israel and the Jewish people of the Diaspora” (Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1983, 172).

The Israeli army has also contributed to the socialization of new immigrants. The army devotes much time to strengthening future officers’ emotional and national commitment to the Israeli state (Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1983, 179). Reserve duty until the age of 55 maintains the link between the armed forces and the citizens throughout the latter’s working life.

The absorption and integration of Jewish immigrants in Israeli society was related to the process of modernization. The dominant framework was that of the modernization of traditional immigrants within an essentially modern society. Israel was in an almost unique situation. Unlike most cases of modern migration, in which the forces of modern economic and political processes were brought by immigrants to the traditional native groups, in Israel it was traditional immigrants who came to a relatively modern society.

The differences between the immigrants and the absorbing society meant that the immigrants had a number of adjustment problems, such as learning new social and cultural skills, becoming more future-oriented, and participating in democracy. Some factors in the absorbing structure impeded the process of absorption. These included allocation of services without consideration of immigrants’ productivity, which limited incentive to work, and the dependence of immigrants on bureaucratic agencies, which resulted in passivity and apathy.

Emphasis on the relationship between absorption of Jewish immigrants and modernization of Israeli society was often accompanied by the argument that there is a pluralistic tendency among the Jewish population in Israel. There is ethnic diversity among Jewish immigrants to Israel in the sense of different cultural systems and orientations. Therefore, those immigrants found it hard to be fully absorbed in one society with a common cultural orientation.

The most important factor in the consolidation of the Israeli society has been the history of the state. Throughout their short history of less than 50 years, Israeli citizens have shared more collective experiences and challenges than other states face in generations. “As a small country, in which any event of

note will impinge directly on either one's own life or that of someone of one's acquaintance, every war, border incident, or reprisal raid has strengthened that sense of joint purpose and destiny which underpins any viable national community" (Cohen, 1990, 30).

The solidarity of the Jewish community is different from that of the Egyptian village. The Jewish community is not divided along clan lines. "Jews were not, therefore, pitted against each other in the defense of tribal interests and honor—that source of so much discord in the Arab World—but were united as a minority against an alien and often hostile majority" (Cohen, 1990, 31).

The status of the individual Jew within the community is very different from that of the Egyptian *fellah*. Most of the collectivist oriental cultures, including that of Egypt, achieve group cohesion at the expense of individual rights. Israeli society, however, has a deep respect for the uniqueness of the individual and the promotion of personal autonomy. Individualism is encouraged from an early age. Israeli children are taught to express their moral responses independent of their parents and friends. "Individual discrimination and responsibility—conscience, not shame—is the guide to moral conduct" (Cohen, 1990, 32). The spirit of self-assertion in the face of pressure to conform is a popular pattern of Israeli behavior.

So, unlike the solidarity that characterizes the village community in Egypt, individuality and personal independence are the dominant cultural traits of Israeli society. "If the village is the seedbed of the Egyptian culture, that of Israeli culture is the small, often urban community of the diaspora" (Cohen, 1990, 30). Jews in Europe lived in self-contained communities where they possessed a substantial measure of autonomy. Their immigration to Israel led to a strong sense of individuality in modern Israel (31).

So, while Egypt has witnessed migration from traditional villages to big cities, Israel has witnessed the immigration of many Jews coming from the urban subcultures of Europe to the promised land of Israel. The Jews who settled in Israel came, overwhelmingly, from countries of two civilizations, from Christendom and the lands of Islam. Inevitably, they brought with them much of the civilization of the countries from which they came, including their perceptions and definitions of identity. Anyone who has visited Israel will recognize the difference between, for example, Jews from Berlin and Jews from Baghdad, not in their Jewishness, but in the German culture of one, and the Iraqi Arab culture of the other. But this contrast goes beyond city or country; it arises from the difference between the two civilizations, Christian and Moslem, that meet in this small Jewish state.

The much-discussed distinction between Ashkenazic Jews (Jews from northeastern Europe who are descendants of those who fled Germany during the Crusade) and Sephardic Jews (Jews who are descendants of those who were exiled from Spain during the Inquisition), in purely Jewish terms, is only about minor differences of ritual, each recognizing the other as valid. This distinction has no theological or legal significance. Nor does the difference arise

from the conflict between Euro-American and Afro-Asian Jews. “The really profound dividing line is between the Ashkenazic and the Sephardic Jews. The Jewish immigrants to Israel brought with them, from their countries of origin, much of their cultures of origin, and it was therefore inevitable that there should have been disagreements and even clashes between them” (Lewis, 1999, 37).

The state of Israel thus brought together, with a common citizenship and a common religion, immigrant groups of two major religiously defined civilizations, in both of which the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews had played a minor but significant role. These groups brought with them very different cultural traditions on such matters as the relations between politics and religion, between power and wealth, and more generally, on the manner in which power is attained, exercised, and transferred.

One of the basic concepts governing the Israeli culture is the redemption of the “Zionist” land or the “Land of Israel.” This concept has governed most of the Israeli government’s policies and plans. For example, the land-use and land-rights policies had the effect of “stripping land away from the Arab population,” especially in those areas that were placed under strict Israeli control (Andersen, Seibert, & Wagner, 1998, 113). “Zionism was a messianic movement that clothed the traditional religious goal of a restoration of the Jewish people to their historic homeland in the garb of secular nationalism” (Cohen, 1990, 34).

At a practical level, the Zionist movement was, to a large extent, successful in establishing all the constituents of an autonomous national community. It built factories, reclaimed the soil, organized representative institutions, mobilized for self-defense, introduced the Hebrew language, and developed a national literature. However, most of these social changes were negative. Religious beliefs and the *halakha*—the code of behavior that used to govern the life of the traditional Jew—were rejected and socially neglected. Traditional morality was abandoned and replaced by Western social forms. So, Israeli society started witnessing a period of informality accompanied by a neglect of traditional Jewish values. When new immigrants arrived in the country, they were encouraged to turn their backs on their traditional beliefs and ways.

This situation raised the issue of religiosity versus secularization in Israeli society. Secularization, “the process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness lose their social significance,” has commonly been viewed either as a dimension or a consequence of modernization (Ben-Rafael & Sharot, 1991, 87). Industrialization, urbanization, the growth of science and technology, the spread of education, and the development of the mass media have been seen as contributing factors in the decline of religion.

Whatever its limitations in other contexts, the modernization-secularization perspective appears to work well in the case of Western Jews. “The precipitating factor in the decline of religiosity among Jews in Central and Western Europe was their movement out of what had been semi-autonomous and

highly bounded communities” (Ben-Rafael & Sharot, 1991, 88). The transition of immigrants into the wider societies involved concentration in large urban centers; diffusion into the modern sectors of education, commerce, and industry; and participation in the political institutions of their respective nations. Increased social interaction with non-Jews and participation in modernizing societies were accompanied or followed by a sharp decline in Jewish religious practice.

Some Jewish immigrants in Israel resolutely discarded their Jewish civilization along with their Jewish dialects and orthodox practices. In their place, they invented the “New Hebrew Man.” The tenuous Jewish tradition they retained—mainly as a net for drawing and holding together the disparate immigrant Jewish communities—“consists today of rather irritating constraints on foods, marriage laws, and the like, as well as a calendar of Jewish holidays. This is probably the one vestige of the genuine civilization, but being isolated from the rest of the organic structure, it does not signify very much. Indeed, it suffers the fate of all religions in the secular, westernized worlds” (Yael, 1998, 72).

It is worth mentioning here that most Jewish immigrants from North Africa and Asia underwent comparatively little secularization, and they conceived of their immigration to Israel as a fulfillment of messianic prophecies or as a means of expressing and continuing their sacred culture. They did not distinguish Judaism from their “parochial” cultural legacy, and were not, therefore, ready to abandon those cultural attributes that they had adhered to in the diaspora. “Their contact with secularized Jews in Israel came as a shock to many, and their consciousness of the need to defend their primordial attributes led many to strengthen their traditional ways during their first years in the new society” (Ben-Rafael & Sharot, 1991, 46).

The continuing decline in the number of pupils enrolled in religious elementary schools suggests that the number of Israelis who define themselves as religious is declining. “The importance of the Jewish tradition is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the new civil religion, unlike Zionist-socialism, lacks a coherent ideological formulation. It lacks, as it were, a theory” (Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1983, 135).

Some scholars argue that what is missing in Israel is an underlying civilization. The only Jewish society in Israel that may be said to have a civilization is the orthodox community. “The attraction of orthodoxy for certain individuals in secular Israeli society lies in the awareness of its deep-rooted civilization, with the added charm that it is ‘our own’ meaning that the road leading to it is wide open and free of the difficulties of assimilating into an alien civilization, however attractive. Modern Israelis who join the orthodox community feel that they are reattaching themselves to their ‘roots,’ i.e., their grandparents and forefathers, thus gaining a sense of solidity and security-in-continuity which is lacking in secular Hebrew society” (Yael, 1998, 75).

One of the early signs that the Zionist civilization was crumbling was the abandonment of the soil. Cultivating the soil was one of the strongest tenets of Zionism, yet the Jewish civilization for untold generations has been entirely urban. "In reality, the majority of the Jews in Palestine lived in urban communities, rather than in the agricultural ones that dominated the literature and arts and all Zionist propaganda, domestic and external . . . But in a matter of decades, and despite considerable incentives to the contrary, the percentage of Jews living on the land went down" (Yael, 1978, 75).

There is no doubt that many Israelis are uneasily aware of the situation, even if they have not formulated it in quite this way. Reactions have been varied, but the response that has dominated the cultural life of the country for a long time has been a determined effort to make it an extension of Europe. "Conscious of the thinness and artificiality of the would-be Hebrew civilization, many people strive to fill the gaps, so to speak, with cultural imports. And while the center of gravity has been shifting from Europe to the United States, the overall tendency remains the same. There is a rather desperate air about it, and the manifestations are too numerous to mention" (Yael, 1978, 78).

Based on the material presented in this chapter, it is clear that Israeli culture is more Westernized than Egyptian culture. In this context, Hess (1996) referred to Israel as an example of a culture with which the Western correspondents are familiar. Hess quoted Thomas L. Friedman, the former *New York Times* correspondent to Israel saying, "Put simply, news from modern Israel is more appealing and digestible for people in the West than news from elsewhere, because the characters, the geography, and the themes involved are so familiar, so much a part of our cultural lenses" (43). In the same vein, Schleifer (1987) argued that "Israel is one of the easiest, most convenient places in the entire world [much less an otherwise highly reserved or restrictive Middle East] for a foreign correspondent to work" (348). According to Schleifer, Israel is an outstandingly secular society as opposed to the religious atmosphere in the Arab world. On this subject, he said:

In contrast to the conservative, family-oriented, and religiously colored social life in the Arab Islamic world, Israel is "fun"; its prevailing lifestyle is comfortable and familiar to the typical young foreign correspondent. (1987, 350)

## CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a brief overview of the cultural values, religious traditions, norms, and rituals practiced in both Israeli and Egyptian societies. It can be assumed from this chapter that unlike Egyptian society, whose values and traditions are different from the Western world, Israeli society is more Westernized in nature. This is because most of the Jews who immigrated to Israel from Europe have brought with them European values and styles of life.

Based on this assumption, it can be hypothesized that Western correspondents would be more familiar with Israeli society than they would be with Egyptian society.

In the next chapter, I discuss my life in Egypt and my personal experience in Israel to give the readers a sense of what it was like for someone of Egyptian origin to be exposed to Israeli culture.

## 5

---

### AN “INSIDER” IN EGYPT; AN “OUTSIDER” IN ISRAEL

This chapter is a cross-cultural study. In it I present my experience in coping with the cultural differences between Egypt and Israel, and relate how these differences could affect Western correspondents' access to information about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Edelstein, Ito, and Keplinger (1989) lamented that too many studies have been done on a country-by-country basis in single cultural contexts. Edelstein held that it is necessary to adopt a multicultural, comparative perspective to cope with the complicated events on international agendas. “We have taken a straightforward view of ‘comparative.’ It is a study that compares two or more nations (or other entities) with respect to some common activity. In international studies, region A is compared to region B with respect to the flow of news into and out of those and other regions” (4).

In these terms, I am an observer looking at nations and regions and comparing their behavior directly with respect to a certain framework or meaning that is common to both at the same (or equivalent) moment in time and space. In this context, such terms as “comparative,” “cross-national,” “cross-cultural,” and “intercultural” can be used interchangeably.

While conducting this research in Egypt, I was a participant observer because I am part of that society and I am familiar with the various cultural situations and contexts within its realm. So, I was wearing two hats: one as an objective researcher and the other as someone who was born and raised in Egypt. However, I tried to make myself aware of my participation and my in-

volvement in Egyptian society, and I tried to avoid becoming unthinkingly and impulsively immersed in it throughout my research. In Israel, however, I was a cross-cultural observer, and during my stay there, I encountered different cultural situations without getting intensely involved in them.

## MY LIFE IN EGYPT

I would like to give the readers an insight into my years of growing up as an Egyptian, as I believe this would help them understand my approach to this study in a broader context. It is always hard to write about one's culture and one's native country because many things are taken for granted or overseen, but I will try to draw a personal portrait of my life in Egypt as I see it.

I come from an upper-middle class urban background. My father is a retired police general and a personnel manager at an investment company, and my mother is a manager of one of Egypt's national banks. I have one brother, a lieutenant in the police. I was born in Alexandria, Egypt, which is a nice Mediterranean city. I wish I could have spent more years there because Alexandria has a certain magic to it that is hard to explain. However, I moved to Cairo with my parents when I was six years old.

I was raised in a comfortable, spacious apartment in one of Cairo's nice neighborhoods. Most members of my extended family used to live very close to us, and so we visited them on a weekly basis. It is worth mentioning here that family solidarity is one of the major features of Egyptians' daily lives, whether they are living in a village or in a city. I remember, for example, that we used to go to my grandmother's house every weekend, where I would meet my uncles, my aunts, and my cousins, and we would socialize past midnight. This closeness and sense of belonging to my extended family have cultivated in me a feeling of being part of a group and a big extended family whose members would be of help to me whenever I needed it. The impact of my family on my life has always been so great that it exceeded other agencies of socialization, such as schools, peers, and the mass media. My parents have always encouraged me to have a goal in life and to be persistent and perseverant in trying to achieve it. That helped me a lot throughout my educational years and in my endeavors after that.

Having been born and raised an Egyptian Moslem, I have always tried to practice and maintain the religious rituals of Islam: praying five times a day, fasting during the holy Islamic month of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Moslem calendar), and paying money (*Zakat*) to help the poor and needy. As a child, I would accompany my father to mosque for the Friday prayers, during which we used to listen to the Friday religious speeches. Then, after the prayers, we would socialize with family members and friends outside the mosque. Religion in Egypt was a mandatory subject at schools, and this helped strengthen and instill religious values in me.

My parents sent me to a private English school for my elementary, preparatory, and secondary years. I always felt that the educational system in Egypt was very centralized, and it was under the direct supervision of the Egyptian Ministry of Education, which prescribed the curriculum, appointed teachers, and set general examinations. The educational system in Egypt was also patriarchal and paternalistic in the sense that the teachers were imposing ideas on their students. There was hardly any discussion or interaction allowed on the students' part. The nature of that relationship helped reinforce certain ideologies among the students and did not allow those students to express their opinions freely about those ideologies.

One of the ideologies I learned as a student and I grew up with was that Israel was Egypt's foe and that all the Israelis were “bad” people. Nobody dared to challenge, or even discuss, that ideology, which has always been reinforced by the Egyptian mass media. We used to buy at least two national newspapers every day (my father has always been an avid reader of newspapers). I remember reading in Egyptian papers that Egypt was “the nucleus of Arab unity,” and that the Egyptians shared the responsibility of solving Arab problems, among which was regaining Palestine for the Arabs. The Egyptian educational system and mass media cultivated in me patriotism to the homeland and nationalism to the larger Arab nation.

Many of the ideologies that we learned at school were brought up and discussed in informal settings and outings with friends and peers. Like many other Egyptians, I used to socialize with my friends at coffee shops. However, a coffee shop was more than just a place for socializing for Egyptians; it was used also for the dissemination of news and the discussion of political and social affairs. I remember that almost all my friends from high school had negative opinions about Israel, but I also remember that most of them knew very little about Israel.

During my teenage years (mid- to late 1980s), Egyptian society started witnessing an ongoing conflict between the old and the new, the traditional norms and values of the society and the modern values imported from the West. For example, many teenagers were listening to hard rock music and wearing torn jeans. Those teenagers were revolting against some of society's old values and traditions. Most of the Western values were opposed by the older Egyptian generations who thought that Western values would contaminate the original cultural norms of Egyptian society.

During that time, Western influence and the general process of modern technological and social change were affecting the family as well as other aspects of Egyptian life, particularly in the cities. One main venue for Western influence was the satellite dish. Under some pressure from me and my brother, my parents agreed to get us a satellite dish through which we could watch more than 140 different channels, among which were five Israeli channels. I still remember how my curiosity to watch these Israeli channels made me spend hours every day following their programs. This was my first direct expo-

sure to the Israeli media, and I realized after watching these programs that some of them were similar to the ones broadcast by Egyptian television. We were lucky to have the satellite dish. However, many other Egyptian families refused to get satellite dishes for fear of exposing their children to some of what they believed were obscene programs broadcast through the satellite dishes.

After finishing high school, I decided to go to the American University in Cairo (AUC), a liberal private school, which was independent from the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education. At AUC, all the syllabi were American and so were many of the faculty members. I majored in mass communications and minored in English and comparative literature. Studying at AUC altered my way of thinking, expanded my horizons, and made me question some of the older ideologies that were imposed on me and that I used to take for granted. The liberal education I received at AUC gave me the opportunity to think creatively and to express my opinions freely without any pressures or fears of being ostracized. It liberated me from narrow interests and prejudices and helped me learn to observe reality with precision, judge events and opinions critically, think logically, and communicate effectively. It was during that time that I started to develop an interest in studying international and intercultural communication. I started to realize the importance of international dialogue and communicative interaction across cultural and political lines of demarcation.

A few years after my graduation, I decided to pursue a doctorate degree in journalism and communication in the United States. I was determined to work on a topic that would help international communication scholars understand the difficult processes of interpersonal and group interactions across cultures. That is how I thought about the idea of that study.

## AN “ARAB MIND-SET”

The process of observing and exploring the political and cultural differences between Egypt and Israel through Western correspondents’ eyes was not an easy task for me. Having been born and raised in Egypt, I have always been exposed to messages disseminated by the Egyptian news media, which often described Israel as the “enemy,” the “aggressor,” and the “intruder” on Arab land. This undoubtedly affected the way I regarded the Arab-Israeli conflict within the context of the “Arab mind-set.” Before undertaking this research project, I was aware of all the personal biases and preconceptions I might have had about Israel, and I tried not to carry any of them into this study.

## INVOLVEMENT IN EGYPT; DETACHMENT FROM ISRAEL

Undertaking this study made me realize that analyzing any culture in a thorough manner requires being totally detached from that culture and ob-

servicing it from a distance. I was faced with the challenge of trying not to take the comments made by Western correspondents in Egypt for granted and placing their answers in the proper context. I tried hard not to let my immersion in Egyptian culture and my personal involvement and familiarity with Egyptian society affect the freshness of my perspective, speculation, and thinking about what the correspondents in Egypt said.

Analyzing the Israeli culture, however, and thinking about what the correspondents in Israel said was a much easier task. I knew very little about Israeli society. In fact, throughout my educational years in Egypt, the mere mention of any aspect of life in Israel was taboo. I had not visited Israel before undertaking this project, and therefore my knowledge of Israeli society was limited to what was written in the few books I have cited dealing with Israeli culture and society.

Initially, I thought that my minimal knowledge of Israeli society would lead to a cross-cultural misunderstanding on my part, which would hinder my comprehension and assessment of what the correspondents told me. However, this turned out not to be the case. In fact, my sense of “otherness” or detachment—much stronger in Israel than it was in Egypt—made it easier for me to speculate about what the correspondents in Israel said and to analyze their remarks in a critical manner. I realized that the less profound a cultural influence, the less likely it is to be taken for granted.

## IMPORTANT REMARKS

Before discussing my personal experience in Israel in detail, I would like to highlight two significant remarks. First, although the main objective behind my visit to Israel in the fall of 1998 was to conduct scientific research and in-depth interviews among the Western correspondents stationed there, my experience in Israel went beyond doing research for a study. In fact, the month that I spent in Israel left a long-lasting impact on my life in general and on the way I view Israelis.

Second, my personal opinions that are mentioned in this chapter with regard to the Israelis and the Palestinians whom I met while in Israel are merely personal opinions about particular persons and particular circumstances. This means that they should not by any means be considered generalizations about the Israelis or the Palestinians.

## PREPARING FOR THE VISIT

Throughout my planning for my visit to Israel, I was a doctorate candidate in the School of Journalism at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. I was so anxious about the whole experience; it was something beyond my imagination to meet and talk to Israeli citizens, not to mention visiting their country and living with them. I heard from many people that it is very hard for an

Arab to get a visa for Israel, and so, I expected lots of obstacles while trying to get the visa. I applied for the visa at the Israeli Consulate in Chicago (the closest Israeli Consulate to Carbondale, Illinois), and, to my surprise, I got it very easily within a couple of weeks. I think the fact that the university supported my application made a big difference. My anxiety reached its peak during the last few days before my departure to Israel. I remember calling my parents in Egypt and telling them about my intended trip to Israel, and I remember their extreme worries about this trip, and how they strongly discouraged me from taking such a trip. They even tried to convince me to choose any country other than Israel for my research.

### UPON ARRIVAL

After a nine-hour trip from the United States to Israel, I was glad to arrive in Tel Aviv. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the airport was very busy. Once I set foot in the airport, my heart was beating very fast. I felt I was going to faint. The lady at the gate checked my passport thoroughly, and then decided to keep it for a while, telling me that they had to make a quick security check on the information on my passport.

Although I had prepared myself for the worst, I started to panic, and I asked her how long it would take them to conduct this check. She told me that she did not know and asked me to have a seat until they called my name. I had no choice. I waited for almost a half hour. It was the longest half hour in my life. Finally, they called my name, gave me back my passport, and told me “Welcome to Israel.”

I then took my two pieces of luggage and went out of the airport. I took the bus to downtown Tel Aviv.

### IN TEL AVIV

The bus ride from the airport to downtown Tel Aviv took about 45 minutes. I was very exhausted, so I started to look for a youth hostel I knew of from the Internet. The bus stop was very far from the hostel, and I could not walk because my luggage was heavy. I started looking for a taxi, but, unfortunately, that night marked Rosh Hashana (the Jewish new year), and the streets were practically empty. It took me almost two hours to find a cab driver who agreed to take me to the hostel. The driver was Palestinian, and, obviously, he was not celebrating that event.

### GOOD TIMING

The timing of my visit to Israel was very fortunate. Certainly the Arab-Israeli conflict was much more complicated then it is now, but during the period of my visit, there was a certain relative calm. I arrived in September

1998, just one month before the Israeli and Palestinian leaders agreed to a land-for-peace deal on the West Bank, at the Wye River Conference Center in Maryland.

There was nothing much going on in Jerusalem or the West Bank at the time, which gave me the opportunity to engage in lengthy conversations with the foreign correspondents in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, something that they would not have done had there been violence going on between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

### ISRAELIS ARE “HUMANS”

Before my visit to Israel, I had never had any encounters with Israeli citizens. However, I did have some Jewish friends in the United States. Those friends were not Israeli citizens. The mass media and the books I read about Israel were my only frames of reference to form a mental picture about the Israelis. Needless to say, throughout the years that I spent in Egypt, I always thought of the Israelis as harsh soldiers with weapons and heartless politicians. This mental picture started to change throughout my stay in Israel. I started to meet “average” Israeli citizens on the street; I started to mingle with Israelis at coffee shops; I started to realize that Israelis have emotions—they laugh, they cry, they play, they socialize; they are, after all, humans.

Many Israelis were very surprised to meet an Egyptian citizen. In fact, some Israelis told me that it was the first time in their lives they had met and talked with an Egyptian. I could tell they were very happy and excited. They were curious to know why I was visiting their country. They also wanted to know what I thought about them as Israelis.

I noticed that most Israelis, even those with low educational levels, were very interested in politics. I was amazed to see how knowledgeable many Israelis were about what was going on in the Middle East. I believe that the Israeli news media have contributed to the Israelis’ knowledgeability about the political situation in the Middle East. This is because most of the Israeli media broadcast several political programs that analyze Middle East politics.

I still remember some encounters with Israeli citizens that reflected their human nature. Once I was waiting at a bus station, and I wanted to go to one of the newspaper offices in town; however, I did not know which bus would get me there. So, I approached one of the people standing at the station. That individual expressed a great willingness to help me, and he even volunteered to explain to me in great detail where the address was. During our conversation, several buses passed by, and he missed his bus to give me directions.

On another occasion, the driver of a bus I was riding in started a conversation with me. He told me he was a Jew from Morocco, and he had migrated to Israel. And when he learned I was an Egyptian, he shook hands with me and said: “Our grandparents have fought against each other for years, but the fact

that you and me are having this conversation shows that there is some hope for a full peace in the region.”

### LIVING WITH AN ISRAELI FAMILY

Before leaving the United States for Israel, some American friends gave me contact information for an Israeli family who lived in Haifa in northern Israel. I called this family a few days after my arrival, and introduced myself to them. They were very welcoming, and insisted on inviting me to visit them and spend a couple of days at their home.

I spent a very nice and relaxing weekend there. They had two boys, seven and four years old. The boys could not speak English, but they seemed very excited about my visit. In fact, the elder son went to his school the next day and told his classmates proudly that he had an Egyptian visitor at his house; however, they did not believe him.

This Israeli family was very hospitable. They went out of their way to make me feel at home. They took a vacation from their work to show me around and gave me their sons' room to sleep in.

### SECURITY PARANOIA

It does not take long for any visitor to Israel to realize how paranoid the Israelis are when it comes to security. I think they are, to some extent, justified in their concerns. This is because they have always been in a state of war, and they have always felt that they were being targeted by their neighbors. This security paranoia is something that I did not sense when I was in Egypt.

The streets of Israel were full of soldiers and security officers. One day, I was getting off a bus in West Jerusalem, and a security guard came running after me asking to see my ID. I was very surprised, and I refused to do that. However, he insisted, telling me that he had the right to check the IDs of people he suspected at any place and at any time. I reluctantly showed him my passport, which I carried with me all the time. He looked at the photo in the passport and then looked at me and let me go.

On another occasion, I was looking for someone to ask about a television station's address in downtown Jerusalem. I approached an individual and asked him for directions. Before I finished my sentence, he started running away from me in complete horror. On a third occasion, I was on a bus when the bus driver noticed an unclaimed bag near the front seat. He stopped the bus to inquire about who owned the bag. He did not restart the bus until he found the bag's owner.

The most striking experience that reflects the Israelis' obsession with security was at the checkpoints that I had to pass through during my daily trips back and forth between Bethany (a Palestinian West Bank city on the outskirts of Jerusalem where I was staying) and Jerusalem. Palestinians who live in the West

Bank but work in Jerusalem have to pass through these checkpoints on a daily basis. They usually ride in a van (driven by a Palestinian) with West Bank plates, which are quite different from Jerusalem plates. Whenever Israeli soldiers see such a van approaching the checkpoint, they stop it and insist that every passenger leave the van to be checked thoroughly.

Many Palestinians work in Jerusalem illegally, and they do not have a permit that allows them to be in Jerusalem. In this situation they ask the driver to take them to Jerusalem using back roads in order to avoid the checkpoints. Sometimes, the Israelis set new checkpoints on these back roads, and they take any Palestinian who does not have a Jerusalem permit to jail. Because I had a valid tourist visa stamped on my passport, I did not have problems passing through these checkpoints. However, on a couple of occasions, the soldiers held me for more than a half hour and interrogated me about the reasons for my visit to Israel.

## GHOST CITY

Israel celebrates the Sabbath holiday (a Jewish religious tradition), which starts at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday of every week. During that time, the streets are always empty; there are no pedestrians, no cars, no open restaurants or shops, no lights; everything becomes dead. In observance of the Sabbath, the orthodox Jews pray at the synagogues and abstain from traveling and doing any kind of work. In contrast, as I mentioned earlier, Moslems celebrate Friday as their holy day, during which time they go to the mosque and pray.

I was once walking in West Jerusalem on a late Friday afternoon when I heard a loud siren. Initially, I thought it was an alarm announcing the beginning of a war; however, I realized that this siren marked the beginning of Sabbath when I saw shop owners closing their stores.

## EAST JERUSALEM VERSUS WEST JERUSALEM

Jerusalem is a great historical city. It is the land of three mainstream religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, the city seemed about to explode from the high levels of tension that exist among its inhabitants. From the moment I arrived in Jerusalem, I felt that the walls of the old city were about to talk about the tension.

East Jerusalem, which is inhabited mainly by Palestinians, and West Jerusalem, which is inhabited by Israelis, are separated by one street. Yet, crossing that street is like crossing the borders from one country to a totally different country. On the one hand, East Jerusalem is very lively with narrow streets and lots of Arab *bazaars* (little markets). The shop owners call out loudly for their products, and there are several merchants who sit in the streets selling fresh fruits and vegetables. The Palestinians in East Jerusalem were very friendly to

me. On several occasions, they invited me to come in to their shops for coffee and tea. When they found out I was Egyptian, they greeted me warmly and asked me about my experience dealing with Israelis.

On the other hand, West Jerusalem is quieter with wider streets. It has several European-style coffee shops, where many Israelis sit and sip Nescafé (a very popular drink among the Israelis). The shops and the restaurants in West Jerusalem close much earlier than in East Jerusalem. Also, there tends to be less traffic in West Jerusalem. Moreover, West Jerusalem has huge malls and shopping centers that do not exist in East Jerusalem.

### **PRAYING AT AL AQSA MOSQUE**

My trip to Al Aqsa Mosque (Dome of the Rock) in East Jerusalem was one of the greatest spiritual events of my life. Because of the situation in Israel, which makes it hard for many Arabs to visit Jerusalem, not many Arabs get the opportunity to pray at that mosque, which is considered to be the second holiest place in Islam after Mecca.

I went to Al Aqsa Mosque with a Palestinian friend, who did not have a permit to be in Jerusalem. However, he graciously offered to take the risk of accompanying me, even though he knew that there would be Israeli guards at all its gates. It was a Friday noon, and we decided to have the Islamic Friday prayers there. We entered through one of the back gates, and, fortunately, the Israeli soldiers did not ask my Palestinian friend about his permit. Upon my entrance to the open court of the mosque, I was taken by the view of the Dome of the Rock, which was glowing in the sun. The scene really took my breath. I took several photos before entering the mosque.

As soon as I entered the mosque, I saw the rock which we Moslems believe that Prophet Mohammed rose from to heaven. It was such an amazing and incredible moment, that I cannot describe in words. We spent a few moments looking at the rock before we sat in one of the mosque's corners to listen to the Friday prayers' speech. After we finished our prayers, we left the mosque in a spiritual an atmosphere as we had entered.

### **EASY ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS**

Israel might be one of the easiest countries where one can meet government officials. During my interview with one of the Dutch correspondents stationed in Tel Aviv, she mentioned to me the name of the director of the Israeli Government Press Office (GPO) in Tel Aviv. The next day I showed up at the GPO without an appointment, and, to my surprise, I was able to meet with the director, who gave me all the documents that are usually given to foreign correspondents. She even called the general director of the GPO in Jerusalem and scheduled an appointment for me with him.

When I met with the GPO general director in Jerusalem, I was able to interview him for almost an hour. He was very cooperative, and he gave me his business card and advised me to show it at the airport upon my departure from Israel.

## DEPARTURE FROM ISRAEL

On the day of my departure from Israel, I went to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv at 10 A.M. to catch my 2 P.M. flight. I was advised by some Israeli and Palestinian friends that I needed to get to the airport four hours before my flight to allow time for security checks. Upon my arrival at the terminal building, a security officer approached me and inquired about my passport, even before I had entered the airport. He asked me a couple of questions about my final destination (which was Egypt).

When I checked in at the departure gate, the immigration officer (a young lady in her early twenties) asked me several questions about what I did in Israel, the people I met, the places I visited, and the length of my stay at each place. I showed her the business card that was given to me by the GPO director and explained to her the purpose of my visit. After thirty minutes of asking questions, she gave me my passport back and wished me a pleasant trip. My bags were not even inspected.

## CONCLUSION

Before my visit to Israel, Israeli society had always been a closed book for me. I always wondered about what life would be like in that society; how the regular Israeli citizens go about their day-to-day routines; how they communicate with each other; and how they interact with outsiders on a personal as well as a professional level. All these questions were going on in my mind, and I could not imagine that one day I would actually witness firsthand the daily interactions on the streets of Israel.

I do not deny the fact that I had several stereotypes and predetermined opinions about the Israeli culture, as do many Egyptians and Arabs. These stereotypes were instilled in me by my cultural background and upbringing. However, when I went to Israel and got involved in several social situations with Israelis, most of these stereotypes were proved wrong. This is an illustration of how situations may create their own values, transforming the meaning of culture. In this context, Edelstein said, “Perhaps the best way to distinguish culture from situation is to see the former as representing defined, related, and predictable circumstances. Situations, in contrast, interrupt the flow of culture to call attention to problems” (Edelstein, Ito, & Kepplinger, 1989, 35).

In the next chapter, I discuss the culture of foreign correspondents, and how their functioning, organizational policies, and reporting assignments affect the way they operate.



# 6

---

## THE CULTURE OF FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS

As important gatekeepers to the flow and formation of international news, foreign correspondents contribute to the way people perceive other cultures and societies. The foreign correspondent plays a vital role in the process of cultures communicating with and across other cultures and may be an important factor in the sensitivity and understanding of people of other cultures. As the desire for peace among peoples grows, the role of the foreign correspondent becomes increasingly important and requires a closer examination.

### WHO IS A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT?

The term “foreign correspondents” was defined by Starck and Villaneuva (1992) as “media personnel who report and interpret the actions and events of different societies for a selected audience of readers not native to the country” (2). For the purposes of my study, I have defined the core group of foreign correspondents as consisting of those individuals who are stationed in countries other than that of their origin for the purpose of reporting on events and characteristics of the area of their stationing through news media based elsewhere (in large part in their countries of origin). The term “foreign correspondents” in this study includes not only staff reporters but also editors, writers, producers, and news photographers working for print and broadcast media as well as for wire services.

## FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS AND INTERCULTURAL JOURNALISM

The cultural context in which correspondents operate affects the way they report the news. Several factors, such as preparation for entering a new culture, familiarity with the cultural values, and language ability, affect the correspondents in their understanding of different cultures.

The foreign correspondent is a key player in shaping people's ideas of other cultures and societies. The foreign correspondent's main task is to understand an event rooted in the complexity of one culture and report about it in the context of another culture. In undertaking their roles, foreign correspondents are involved in "intercultural journalism," which means "news and information crossing over from one nation to another" (Starck & Villaneuva, 1992, 4). Foreign correspondents must carry out intercultural journalism in a particularly sensitive way to avoid such cultural barriers as ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and preconceived frames of reference. They should translate the "foreign" into the "familiar" by placing events in cultural frameworks of understanding for the general public. This requires that they translate these events into terms that readers can assimilate and, in a sense, make their own.

Hohenberg (1964) said "it will be the role of the foreign correspondent to create understanding between peoples by bringing to them more meaningful news of each other. As such, he may very well be a decisive element. For it may fall to him in the future, as it has in the past, to represent the difference between war and peace" (452).

## FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS AND PERSONAL BIASES

Foreign correspondents are human beings, and so they might have their own biases and personal leanings and prejudices that might affect the way they report on a specific event or view a particular country. "Foreign correspondents carry with them a good deal of baggage other than their resumes and backgrounds that ultimately influences where they want to go and what they want to explore" (Hess, 1996, 58).

Rosenblum (1981) discussed the impact of bias on the process of interpreting news about other cultures. In writing about other societies, foreign correspondents, he argued, must be aware of the difficulties of overcoming cultural biases. In this context, he wrote: "the question of bias is particularly important, since readers and serious viewers add their own distortions. Logically, a person's attitude towards Jews, Arabs, black Africans or Cubans will affect how he interprets wars involving them. From far away, it is difficult to understand causes of hostilities and details of conflicts, even when they are reported with pristine objectivity. If elements of bias are added, serious misunderstanding is inevitable" (173).

Foreign correspondents might be subject to a dilemma between their personal biases and their professional duties as journalists. For example, Jewish correspondents stationed in Israel might have this dilemma: “Am I a Jew first, or a journalist first?”—this question is asked by many American Jewish correspondents in Israel. Linda Sherzer, a Jew who covered the Gulf War from Jerusalem for CNN, said she would not have reported the locations of SCUD missile strikes because to do so might have improved Iraqi accuracy (the situation was hypothetical; she was not allowed to report this type of information).

For a while the *New York Times* tried to finesse the potential clash of personal and professional loyalty by not assigning Jewish reporters to the Jewish state. The policy finally ended when Thomas L. Friedman was sent to Jerusalem in 1984. So, “journalists can be journalists first, that is, they can represent an elite fraternity, but transcending one’s own history can be wearing work” (cited in Hess, 1996, 57).

## THE CULTURAL FUNCTIONING OF FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS

Several studies have been conducted among foreign correspondents to investigate how they view their profession and the way they function. One of those studies was carried out by Starck and Villaneuva (1992) who conducted in-depth interviews with six American correspondents, in which they focused on the means of functioning in a foreign culture. According to the respondents, cultural experience involves subtle aspects of communication, such as mannerisms. One correspondent said, “You have to get used to what the unwritten rules are. . . . If you use the wrong culture, you get the wrong answers” (18).

Lack of cultural preparation was a common theme agreed upon among the correspondents interviewed in Starck and Villaneuva’s 1992 study as one of the main reasons behind insufficient reporting. They all argued that background reading is a key factor for the success of foreign correspondents. They also mentioned personal involvement and listening to people attentively as elements for foreign correspondents’ understanding of foreign cultures. The correspondents also referred to cultural sensitivity, which they defined as “familiarity with the historical and cultural context of another society and an empathy for other ways of life” (18). According to those correspondents, the longer the stay in a country, the higher the sensitivity to that country’s culture.

Pedelty (1995) noted that one of the means by which correspondents can increase their cultural sensitivity is to increase their informal relationships by cultivating friendships in the countries at which they are operating and conversing with common people. In this context, Pedelty said that informal storytelling provides reporters with information that they might not have access to through formal or government sources.

One quality that the best foreign correspondents bring to their work is a sense of the nature of the countries and regions to which they are assigned. When Jack Foisie retired in 1985 after 20 years overseas for the *Los Angeles Times*, he wrote, “I have come to join the consensus that a firm grounding in a language and a culture is essential to a foreign correspondent” (1985, 15).

But how well can a foreign correspondent communicate with his or her audience? Some believe that the news business performs its mission best if its workers are broadly representative of society, if reporters collectively resemble their audiences. However, when reporters go abroad, they are often criticized for not resembling those of whom they are reporting. Journalists debate whether—and if so, how—backgrounds that are different from those of their audiences or subjects produce different results.

## FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS AND ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

In the culture of foreign correspondence, news organizations have various schemes for arranging their workforces. For example, the system at the *Los Angeles Times* resembles the management of a diplomatic corps: foreign correspondents are members of a select cadre who rotate every three or four years, usually without becoming geographic specialists, and stay on the “merry-go-round” as long as they perform their duties adequately and wish to remain in the service. The rationale apparently is that foreign correspondence is essentially different from domestic journalism, or “perhaps simply that international correspondents have learned such valuable tickets of the trade that replacing them would be deleterious to the organization” (Hess, 1996, 53).

The *New York Times* seems to link a reporter’s having been a foreign correspondent with promotion to the top editorships. The existence of this fast track explains why some reporters are sent abroad briefly and later return home.

The *Washington Post* has been phasing out its permanent cadre, preferring instead to send reporters abroad for one, or at the most two, tours of three or four years each. This is a personnel policy that reflects a large number of reporters who are qualified for foreign postings and a large number of challenging assignments in Washington for which returning reporters compete. The *Post* is also more likely than other papers to use former foreign correspondents as editors on the foreign desk.

The system chosen in each case has as much to do with organizational maintenance (how large enterprises try to keep their employees functioning as productively as possible), as with perceptions of how best to gather information abroad. Differences in personnel policies and other practices reflect newspapers’ distinct cultures.

In television, too, there are varying corporate cultures and management practices. Because CNN was designed to be an international broadcaster, its

creator Ted Turner claims he imposes fines on correspondents to encourage them to “eliminate the use of the word *foreign* when talking about other nations and other individuals on this planet” (Hess, 1996, 55). CNN also encourages a diversity of accents; correspondents in bureaus in New Delhi or Bangkok deliberately do not sound as if they were from South Dakota.

### **ARE FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS BETTER THAN DOMESTIC REPORTERS?**

A former Associated Press bureau chief in Madrid, Spain, once said, “There really isn’t much difference between a good cop reporter and a big-time foreign correspondent” (Hess, 1996, 57). That opinion is right to the extent that many qualities desirable in foreign correspondence—tenacity, integrity, intellectual honesty, and precise and graceful writing—are also important to good domestic reporting. And, of course, seasoned reporters of whatever background can eventually learn to deal with censorship, disinformation, corrupt officials, thuggery, dysentery, and other overseas hazards.

### **FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS AND LANGUAGES**

An important professional tool for the foreign correspondent is the ability to converse in and read the language of the country in which that correspondent is stationed. The necessity of knowing foreign languages is a debatable issue among American correspondents. Those who underestimate its importance argue that English is the language of diplomacy, and that international conferences and official interviews are conducted through interpreters as part of routine foreign office procedures. However, correspondents who believe in the necessity of knowing at least one foreign language argue that “a good correspondent must be able to read the papers of the country not merely for general comprehension but with an eye toward the undertones of articles—which may cast more light on a situation than the article itself” (Kruglak, 1955, 64). While a correspondent may get by well with English, that correspondent cannot get involved in normal communication with the average citizen of a country if that person does not communicate in English.

A survey conducted by Maxwell in the mid-1950s on 209 American correspondents showed that a third of the respondents could speak one foreign language, a tenth could speak two, and about one-twelfth could speak three or more. One-fourth of the respondents spoke no language other than English. Hess (1996) conducted a survey on 404 American correspondents which showed that younger correspondents are less likely than their older colleagues to have a knowledge of many languages. A third of those who began their careers before 1979 claimed some ability in four or more languages; this proportion drops to one-fifth for the next generation. Hess believes that learning language on the job can be a challenge for correspondents. As Caryle Murphy,

the *Washington Post* correspondent in Egypt said: “This is a 12-to-16-hour-a-day job. There is no time to learn Arabic now.” On the other hand, according to Hess, in a country such as Israel, “the small number of Hebrew-speaking foreign correspondents reflects, in part, the large number of Israelis who speak English” (83).

Not many correspondents in Israel speak both Hebrew (the Israelis’ official language) and Arabic (the Palestinians’ official language). Some correspondents speak neither, but if they speak one, it is almost invariably Hebrew. This is hardly balanced by the fact that among those Middle East correspondents reporting on Israel and Palestine but based elsewhere (e.g., Cairo), some may speak Arabic but not Hebrew. Apart from this, most correspondents in the Middle East have to work through intermediaries and depend on translation services as they form their understandings of Middle Eastern cultures (Ulf, 1998).

## FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS AND DANGER

Foreign correspondents often talk of dealing with danger, of being scared, sometimes of exhilaration. In this context, one of the former correspondents in the Middle East said, “You get hooked on your own adrenaline.” Peter Arnett, the former CNN correspondent in Iraq, wrote in his memoirs *Live From the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 Years in the World’s War Zones*, “What I had learned to love [was] the thrill of covering wars, for which there was no substitute” (1994, 323).

When the Committee to Protect Journalists sought to codify safety information for reporters on their way to the former Yugoslavia in 1993, its executive director noted, “We were surprised to learn how little dialogue existed on a formal basis about safety measures, both among journalists and between journalists and their news organizations. There’s a kind of hubris among reporters; they think they are bulletproof” (Hess, 1996, 58).

## HOW LONG SHOULD A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT STAY IN A PLACE?

Most foreign correspondents are likely to be stationed in one place for three to five years, although some remain longer. The question here is: what are the advantages and disadvantages of long and short stays?

It is especially the larger U.S. media organizations that show a clear preference for a rather quick rotation among foreign correspondents. The assumption here is that “going stale” is a significant occupational hazard among foreign correspondents who spend a long time in one place. One stops seeing the potential stories in what one begins to take for granted. Some stories begin to feel repetitious and boring; and one loses that sure grasp of what readers “at home” already know and what has to be explained. However, local knowledge

is also useful. “The first year you are learning, the second year you are on your feet and can give more texture to stories, the third year you are getting tired,” said one veteran American correspondent with experiences from postings on three continents.

The correspondents who remain for longer periods could thus possibly lose some of their freshness of perspective. They, for their part, instead tend to emphasize the intensity and breadth of their knowledge, particularly their personal involvement in the society where they are stationed. Having been around for a long time, they can place new events in the context of old ones, and they know where to turn for informed comments. In addition, there is the language factor. In most instances, correspondents who spend more than three or four years in one country will probably learn the language of that country.

### CAN FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS REACH THE BURNOUT STAGE?

There comes a time when foreign correspondents want to seek another kind of assignment or line of work. In addition to continued interest, reasonable levels of energy and stamina are also necessary to avoid burnout. In this context, one of the former *Washington Post* correspondents said, “Extraordinary demands of finding oneself on a major world story are more wearying each year.”

Burnout can also be associated with particular country and regional assignments. A former Tokyo correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* talked of “Japan burnout syndrome.” He returned to take the Asia-Pacific beat on the paper’s business desk in Los Angeles.

One of CNN’s former correspondents defined overseas burnout as that point when the ratio of hassle to what gets broadcast or published becomes too high. One of the biggest hassles are with hostile governments. Many correspondents suffer from the way countries, especially in the Middle East, withhold visas as a means of controlling press coverage. Others suffer from official lying and surveillance. A former *Time* correspondent said in this regard, “Most of my assignments have involved dealing with repressive police states, most of which simply wear you down with delays and bureaucratic hassles” (Hess, 1996, 109).

Despite the difficulties facing foreign correspondents, many of them find coming home to be more difficult. The correspondent who has returned usually talks of lost independence: after having one’s own office, a desk in a crowded newsroom becomes a symbol of a place in a crowded hierarchy. In this context, a former *New York Times* correspondent said, “It is never easy for a foreign correspondent to return to the home office, no matter how severe his life might have seemed abroad. There are compensations with those hardships.

One is not surrounded by so many editors, so much interoffice pettiness when one is thousands of miles away” (Hess, 1996, 111).

Many foreign correspondents are very content with their jobs, to the extent that they ask for nothing more. A foreign reporter was quoted as saying: “You know, being a foreign correspondent is like being a maitre d’ in a fine restaurant. You meet so many distinguished people under such humiliating circumstances.”

## CONCLUSION

This chapter shed some light on the culture of foreign correspondents, the way they operate, the obstacles they face, and how they prepare for their assignments. It is obvious from the information presented in this chapter that being a foreign correspondent is not an easy job; in fact, it can be very challenging and difficult, but at the same time, it can be very rewarding and exciting.

In the next chapter, I discuss the correspondents’ professional roles and their demographics (e.g., geographic origins, age, educational levels, and formal and informal networks).