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**THE ELUSIVE PEACE**

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As I write these words two crises threaten to disrupt the already fragile state structure of the Middle East. The first crisis is the stalemate in negotiations between the Palestine National Authority and the government of Israel; the second crisis arises from the legacy of the Gulf War in 1991 which achieved its first goal and evicted Iraq from Kuwait, but which created new and still unresolved problems both inside Iraq and in the region.

It is difficult at this moment to predict with certainty what might be the outcome of these crises; what is certain, however, is that they are not unconnected, either in their origins, or in the possibilities they offer for a new vision and for new initiatives.

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 through the initiative of the United Nations altered the territorial division of the Near East decided at the post-1918 international conferences, without taking steps to ensure that the new divisions would conform to either the consent of the inhabitants, or to its own intentions. Apart from its frontiers with Jordan, Israel's frontiers with its Palestinian neighbours and with the state of Syria remain those created by successive conflicts.

The Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, and the subsequent Oslo Accords between the Israelis and Palestinians, adopted a step by step strategy in the hope that the lesser problems, if solved first, would lead to the solution of the greater problems. This strategy has been revealed defective: without knowing where they are going, each party has defined its own goals and its own tempo. The Palestinian perception has grown that the Oslo Accords gave too little, too slowly, while the Israeli perception has grown that they gave too much, too fast. Both timing and substance have become more and more grounds for dispute and confrontation: as the Palestinian negotiators attempted to insert statehood into the agenda, the Israelis began to take steps to delay statehood, or to create new facts on the ground which would dilute the effective sovereignty of a Palestinian state if it should come into existence.

It is now becoming very clear that, left alone to face each other without reference to wider considerations, and without outside help to resolve irreconcilable claims, the Palestinians and the Israelis will not be able to achieve a substantive breach in the present stalemate. The questions of Jerusalem, of the Palestinian refugees, and of water resources, to give three examples, cannot be successfully addressed without Jordanian, Syrian, Lebanese and, even further, Arab, regional and international involvement.

Frustration at the lack of progress in the so-called "peace process", and the widespread Arab perception of an unbalanced American policy towards the parties, have now created a situation in the region in which the current dispute between the Security Council and the Iraqi Government threatens

to escalate to a wider regional dimension. The inconclusive end of the Gulf War in 1991, the enunciation of the “dual containment” policy by the American administration, and the creation of “safe haven” zones inside Iraq have introduced new and dangerous factors into the region. Arab frustration at the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, anger and indignation at the slow starvation of the Iraqi population through sanctions imposed by the Security Council, the transformation of the 'safe haven' zones, notably in northern Iraq, into zones of warfare and chaos, the progressive destabilisation of Iraq without any credible international alternative--all these factors, while they contain the seeds of perhaps imminent and disastrous consequences, at the same time point the way to repairing the mistakes of the past, and to bringing a new vision of the future.

The unsolved question of Israel's final frontiers, and the “no man's land” created in northern Iraq, demonstrate the dangers of tampering with the international frontiers created at the end of the First World War. These frontiers were related more to the interests and the policies of the Great Powers which drew them, rather than to historical, geographical, or demographic realities, but within these frontiers the concept of national sovereignty was implanted. So long as the doctrine of the sanctity of sovereignty remains the basis of international relations, it cannot be violated without dangerous results. At the same time it is becoming more and more evident that the problems of the Middle East demand solutions which transcend national frontiers, and take into account the fact that there are natural resources and human communities which cut across frontiers. Neither the exclusive claim to natural resources, nor the attempt to base nationhood on, homogenous, ethnic, cultural, or sectarian communities are any longer valid bases for international relations, but rather the cause of inter-state conflicts and interference in the internal affairs of neighbouring or distant territories.

The time has surely arrived when the governing leaders of the Middle East must consort together to find a new framework within which they may not only eliminate some of the causes of present friction and conflict, but also within which they may exploit their great natural resources for the benefit of all, and perhaps revive the great cultural heritage which in the past made the Middle East a world centre of civilisation.

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