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Peace needs help of powers

Springtime peace initiatives are blooming in the Middle East. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq have formed a new alliance with the Palestine Liberation Organization aimed at bringing Israel to the negotiating table. Syria, Libya, renegade PLO factions and Russia are stoutly opposing this initiative by pro-Western Arab states. Moscow and Washington will soon "exchange views" on the Mideast.

Meanwhile, Syria and Israel are secretly and futilely negotiating the future of Lebanon under discreet American guidance. European nations are trying to nudge Israel to the negotiating table. The Israelis, up to their ears in problems over their crumbling economy and Lebanon, are not eager to discuss giving back lands that they hold. Only American pressure will budge the Israelis, pressure that may be felt as Jerusalem asks Washington for another \$12.5 billion in handouts.

In the midst of this whirlwind of diplomatic activity, Saudi Arabia, America's most important Arab ally, has boldly suggested that this whole thorny matter of the Palestinians, the West Bank, Gaza and Golan be settled in a major UN peace conference.

The principal members of such a conference, according to the Saudi plan, would be Israel and its Arab neighbors, some sort of PLO representation, the European powers and, significantly, the Soviet Union. It is indeed intriguing to see the ultra-conservative Saudi monarchy, which does not even have diplomatic relations with Moscow, urging that the USSR be included.

Washington has responded negatively. It does not want to see the Soviets allowed into the Middle Eastern peace process. In Washington's view, the Middle East is its exclusive preserve; the U.S. is to be the sole arbiter of peace or war in the region. Israel also opposes Soviet or European involvement, believing that both parties are essentially hostile and unlikely to support its positions.

But is this American and Israeli policy correct? Can any sort of settlement other than a Carthaginian Peace work in the area without Soviet participation? The Saudis, who are mortal enemies of the Russians, should know — and they think Russian participation, however distasteful, is necessary. Here is why.

We all readily accept without question Washington's view that the Middle East is an American area of "vital interest" because of oil and geopolitics. No matter that the U.S. imports less than 10% of its oil from the Middle East.

Washington's area of "vital interest" happens to be almost 8,000 miles away. By contrast, Damascus, Syria or Jerusalem are only 800 miles from the southern Russian border. Thus, the Middle East is as close to Russia as Mexico City is to Texas. When U.S. troops landed in Lebanon, Moscow did nothing. But suppose Russian troops had landed in Veracruz, Mexico, or Nicaragua? One may well imagine the U.S. response.

Russia, like it or not, has at least some legitimate big power interests in the Middle East — just as the U.S. does in Central America. Wishing Moscow was not involved in the Middle East will not change geopolitical realities.

Today, Soviet influence in the Middle East is very limited and faint compared to almost smothering U.S. presence. Yet Russia, through its sometimes ally, Syria, still retains the ability to wreck any peace agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbors. We saw in Lebanon how Syria managed to checkmate the mighty U.S. and even block the Israelis. The wily Syrians could do it again.

For this reason, the Saudis are urging that Russia be included in any peace conference. In this event, Syria would be assured that the issue of its Golan Heights, now virtually annexed by Israel, would not be ignored. Syrian fears that Washington would create an anti-Damascus alliance between Jordan and Israel might be eased.

In the Arab view, Washington is so much under Israeli influence that it cannot be relied upon to either broker or guarantee any settlement. Accordingly, it appears unlikely that a lasting agreement can be reached without a big power guarantee of its terms. If, for example, Israel's borders are to be assured, it makes some sense to have them co-guaranteed by Moscow, Washington, Paris, and London.

The real question here is whether Moscow wants to see a lasting settlement in the Middle East or use the area's conflicts as a means of spreading its own influence at the expense of the U.S. There is certainly truth in this view, cherished by Israel and right-wingers in the Reagan administration. But Moscow, deeply fearful that a nuclear war could be triggered in the volatile Middle East, may also genuinely want some sort of settlement. The Russians certainly recall that the U.S. went onto nuclear alert during the 1973 Yom Kippur War and are hardly eager to repeat the experience. Unlike Washington, Moscow does not seem inclined to go to war for the sake of its Middle Eastern clients.

Perhaps Moscow should be put to the test. Russian influence in the Middle East is real and permanent. Efforts by the U.S. to completely exclude Soviet influence there are unrealistic and could well cause a major war — just as Soviet attempts to grab all of Central America would have the same result.

As the Saudis see it, better to have Moscow helping impose peace on Arabs and Israelis than acting as a dangerous wrecker. Inviting Moscow to join peace talks in an area that is its own strategic backyard may offer the most practical method of reducing the high level of tension between the U.S. and USSR. Who knows, the next Middle East war might even be prevented.