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The Saudi-American partnership

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Fahd is in Washington for talks with members of the Carter administration about the Arab-Israeli situation. Fahd, with King Khalid's approval, has been leading Saudi Arabia in its new activist foreign policy. Under his guidance, the oil and financial superpower has begun wielding substantial political muscle. The result is an alignment in which the confrontation states and the Palestinians are expressing an unprecedented willingness to coexist with a Jewish state of Israel. The bargain requires Israeli agreement to withdraw to approximately the 1967 borders, to allow the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and to reassure its neighbors that Zionism is not an expansionist force in the region.

Fahd's expectations are that the United States — his country's historical partner — will now begin to play its role in convincing Israel to risk such a peace.

Some have charged the Saudis with blackmailing the U.S. with Israel destined to pay a large part of the price. But this is an emotional and rather simplified approach. For the real pressures on the U.S. involve the need to buttress the coalition of Arab moderates, one basis to its own national interest, and further to protect the special friendship so long nurtured with Saudi Arabia. With Saudi Arabia possessing at least one-fourth of the world's oil reserves and already having accumulated financial reserves larger than any country except West Germany, it is difficult to deny the importance of the Saudi-U.S. partnership to the stability of the world economy and the strength of the West's security system.

In short, the Saudi Arabian-American connection is one of mutual advantage, not blackmail. Progress in resolving the Arab-Israeli quagmire, the one major destabilizing factor, has become an agreed goal. And it is one which need not endanger Israel. Indeed, for the first time in Israel's history its neighbors are openly advocating coexistence with a Jewish state in the area.

During a recent visit to Washington Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister of Finance and National Economy, Mansour al-Turki, discussed the possibilities of peace in an interview. "It's an unfortunate thing that happened between the Jews and the Arabs," he commented. "Having a Jewish state is not at issue. It's a common belief. You see, if they just want a Jewish state I wouldn't see any problem. But the Zionists, the way I understand it, they always want to expand. That is what we are afraid of. That is why there is a lack of confidence in Israel's desire for a settlement."

Dr. al-Turki, who was in the U.S. in his role as coordinator of the U.S. Saudi Arabian Joint Economic Commission, went on to emphasize the Saudi desire to reach a full normalization of relations with Israel. "Permanent peace" is the goal. When this is achieved it "means we will not consider Israel as an enemy" any longer. He further suggested that Saudi Arabia would welcome invitations from American Jewish groups to discuss the Middle East situation and U.S.-Saudi relations.

Arab perceptions of Zionist expansionism have been seriously heightened with the unexpected victory of Menahem Begin in Israel. Mr. Begin, likely to be Israel's Prime Minister as soon as a government can be formed, heads Likud, a bloc calling for total and exclusive "Israel sovereignty between the Jordan and the sea." David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding father, once insisted before a Zionist Congress: "The acceptance of partition does not commit us to renounce Trans-Jordan [today's Jordan]; one does not demand from anybody to give up

aries fixed today, but the boundaries of Zionist aspirations are the concern of the Jewish people and no external factor will be able to limit them."

The parallels between Ben-Gurion's view years ago and today's willingness by the PLO to accept a West Bank-Gaza state while retaining the vision, the "dream," of eventual rule over all of Palestine are striking. But the important point to remake is that Arab condemnation of Zionism has logical roots, however much those who know and support Israel are confident the great majority of Israelis would renounce any expansionist thoughts for a real peace.

American officials have been stating for some weeks now what can be summarized in this way: As a result of U.S. discussions to date it sincerely believes that the Arabs are ready to accept Israel in the Middle East, that its Arab friends are not just seeking tactical advantage for the next round of hostilities. The

U.S. sees its role as a mediator: draw the sides together, delineate the issues, suggest common ground, and ultimately suggest ways to bridge the gaps. Its only choices are to try to move toward peace with the chance of failure or to do nothing and be assured of failure.

Prince Fahd's statements this week may give some clues as to the general Arab perception about whether the tide still pulls toward peace after Begin's triumph in Israel. With the moderation shown so far it can be expected the Arabs will not overreact, at least not right away. But the danger of a new drift toward war has been escalated. Since the U.S. will be asking more patience from the Arabs it is also up to the Carter administration to give firm assurances that American efforts to achieve a fair and lasting settlement will not be circumvented.

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