

They appeared to be civilians, but they were very well armed. In its initial confusion, the Republican Guard

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As interest mounts in Middle East, forums sprout across U.S.

By **Mark Bruzonsky**

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Americans as a whole are still, of course, rather naive about matters Middle Eastern. But their leaders are increasingly drawn into the region on a day to day basis. And partly as a consequence, much of the public is beginning to realize it cannot remain as aloof about the region as before the historic events of recent months.

Flag-waving "welcome home the troops" spectacles are breaking out on prime-time TV, leading up to the national celebrations in Washington and New York now scheduled for June.

Early in April, for instance, an Andrews Air Force hanger was turned into a huge indoor stadium for a two

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hour extravaganza with the President and First Lady in front-row seats. Kuwaiti children sang the American national anthem to thunderous applause - their own anthem nowhere to be heard. A parade of Hollywood notables came on

WASHINGTON

stage to praise the troops and the President. The celebration homecoming was broadcast live by CBS. There was no mention, though, that in Iraq's north at the same hour hundreds of thousands of Kurds had been made starving refugees; and in the south as well the U.S. inspired but disowned Shiite rebellion had already been bloodily crushed.

All around the country, in fact, interest in and concern about the situation in the Middle East remains unprecedented in scope. Discussion groups are meeting, organizations are getting involved and conferences are being held. On May 11, for instance, a day-long forum bringing representatives of Middle Eastern countries together will be sponsored at the Institute of World Affairs in Milwaukee. Ambassadors from many of the key Arab countries including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait; representatives from both the Bush Administration and Congress; and of course Israelis and Palestinians of one kind or another are going to be there for the Second Annual George F. Kennan Forum on International Affairs.

A few weeks later intellectuals and academics will gather for a two-day New York City workshop titled "Creating a New World Vision." This time it is the "world order" theorists and friends who will be focusing on what kind of Middle East there should be a decade from now and how to get there.

This new round of conferences and citizens' diplomacy got started with a significant gathering a

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Festival - Nawruz - in Mosul, before the Gulf war.

U.S. Muslims on Eid

people historic cooperation between the United States and Muslim nations of the Middle East. By continuing this trend, we will have a better opportunity to bring peace and stability to the entire region. Our goal must be to resolve disputes through peaceful, diplomatic means, while promoting greater respect for basic human rights and political liberty. I am pleased to know that I can count on the support of the American Muslim community as we work toward that end. Let us join in offering a prayer to God to guide us to the day when freedom and harmony prevail for peoples of all faiths around the world.

Forums...

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diplomacy got started with a significant gathering a few weeks ago in San Francisco. It was hastily but well put together during the weeks while the bombing of Iraq was underway.

As conferences go, this San Francisco kick-off had some special qualities...and gaps. An audience of nearly a thousand participated in the day-long symposium titled "Understanding Arab Perspectives: Reconciliation and Reconstruction after the Gulf War"; a lunch featuring Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan; a plenary address in the morning by Palestinian scholar Hisham Sharabi and one in the afternoon by former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban; and a private \$250 plate dinner in the evening; it was all organized in less than two months "as my response to the Gulf war."

The "my" here belongs to a rather interesting, possibly unique, organizer. Jim Garrison has been active in civic affairs and citizens' diplomacy for some years now. He got started bringing Russians and Americans together during the dangerous and dismal days in the early years of the Reagan Administration when the "evil empire" theme prevailed.

Back then Garrison and Claire Ryle, co-founder of the new Tamalpais Institute, which is named for the highest mountain peak in the San Francisco area, headed up the Easten Institute's Soviet American Exchange Program from 1985 to 1989.

The current focus of this West Coast citizens' diplomacy institute are matters Middle Eastern.

As the bombs began to fall over Iraq in January, Garrison conceived of the conference, which was held on March 23rd, as an "appropriate response." In addition to the San Francisco audience, closed-circuit TV sponsored by the Beyond War Foundation brought it to small groups gathered in nearly a hundred cities around the country.

"I respected the protesters," Garrison opened the conference saying, "but I could not support them because I understood a man like Saddam had to be stopped."

"The question of peace in the Middle East is probably the highest on the world agenda. The war is over but the crisis remains," Garrison continued. "I want my little boy to grow up not only in a peaceful world but in a clean environment."

The Tamalpais conference did bring together a variety of notables. Zbigniew Brzezinski was beamed in from Washington, alongside former Soviet Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze from Moscow.

For the Palestinians there was Hanan Ashrawi from Bir Zeit University on the West Bank and Hisham Sharabi, a Palestinian intellectual long at Georgetown University who in recent years seems to have moved much closer to the Hashemites in Jordan than to the PLO.

Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim was also there, ironically speaking about Muslim fundamentalism of which he is the antithesis.

Fawzi al-Sultan, a Kuwaiti on the Board of Directors of the World Bank came, as did a number of American

Although theme of this forum was dialogue, the major Israeli and Palestinian figures never met each other

personalities who have long been involved in dialogue and discussion - Joe Montville, long associated with the State Department; Sam Keen, an expert in the field of intercultural communications; and Ayad al-Qazzaz, Professor of Sociology at California State University who was born in Iraq.

For an American audience unfamiliar with the history of the Middle East and not often exposed to such a variety of personalities it was indeed an interesting affair.

But for experts the novice of the organizers showed through at many points.

Jim Garrison's enthusiasm, concern and sincerity were always evident; but his references to Camp David made it obvious he considered that a major step forward rather than the political disaster it became.

The reading list handed out was not only incomplete, it was significantly weighted in terms of a pro-Israeli and pro-Camp David point-of-view. True to character, unfortunately, Professor Hisham Sharabi of Georgetown University (who had been involved with the conference organization from the beginning) indicated, when questioned about the reading list, that he hadn't even seen it!

There was even a hand-out from the so-called United States Institute of Peace, a misnamed Reagan-era creation now headed by former Ambassador to Israel Sam Lewis, a man notorious for his pro-Israeli attitudes.

The overall theme of the conference, of course, was dialogue and understanding. And yet, some days after when I asked the main Arab organizer, Professor Sharabi, how he found the primary Israeli who attended, former Foreign Minister Abba Eban, Sharabi surprisingly said "I don't know him."

Sharabi and Eban, it seems, never even spoke. This

case even though Eban was loudly articulating his latest position - a rather self-evident one were it not for the tortuous history of this matter - that the Palestinians should choose their own negotiator, PLO or whatever.

Asked what he thought of Eban, Sharabi curtly responded, "I don't know him... I don't know him at all."

"You didn't want to meet him at the conference?" I asked. "I didn't meet him at the conference. We were not supposed to be making friendships between speakers."

"You didn't go to dinner together?" I pressed. "Yes, we went to dinner together but we had different tables and we were not pushed together at all and that was not the intention."

So much for new forms of dialogue and understanding.

A few weeks after the conference concluded I spoke with both Jim Garrison and Hisham Sharabi. Here are excerpts from their remarks:

Jim Garrison: "The goal for us is somewhat general at the present time. We did a lot of work bringing Soviets and Americans of note together to do a variety of projects, and the results at the political level were sometimes significant, sometimes indirect. So I don't have any delusions of grandeur about the whole thing. And yet there was an energy at this last conference...maybe it was because it was the first major conference after the war...but people were very very impressed with how things were structured and the quality of discussion and so forth.

"At a minimum what we can do (in the future) is something on a much larger scale and bring delegations from various countries and to do it in a way that would bring some of the Israelis and Egyptians and Americans that actually worked on Camp David to the conference in addition to a Palestinian delegation that would probably be put together by Hisham Sharabi and a much stronger European presence.

"We're in discussion with Brzezinski's office about possibly him coming out, and several other people from the Carter Administration and also President Carter himself if he can come.

"I continue to believe that the Gulf war was a major disaster, and that the disastrous consequences are only now being felt... In terms of addressing the real issues, my sense is that the war stirred things up rather than solving anything and I think that the real crisis is yet to come if the Baker initiative bears little fruit.

"We (are thinking) of doing something from Friday night to Sunday afternoon. Hisham will bring in Palestinians. Anis Boukhari would bring in some North Africans. Saad Eddin Ibrahim would bring in the Egyptians. Basically we would go after higher level people. We've put in an invitation to President Carter obviously. And then we would be bringing in a list of sort of moral and spiritual leaders and basically have a much broader discussion again on the theme of understanding Arab perspectives and to talk about the whole themes of reconstruction and reconciliation and some of the complexities of a Palestinian State...

"I have felt that it would be helpful to have some of the people who were involved in the Camp David Accord. That's why it was so helpful to have Abba Eban, for example. He's been involved for so long and he's experienced what's happened and what's worked and what hasn't worked...

"If we could get some major movement in terms of bringing together some of these people from North Africa and the Arab world and Palestinians... God knows who we could get from Israel and from the American Jewish community and so forth and so on and really discuss this over a two and a half day period then this is sort of the next stage where we would like to take it..."

Hisham Sharabi: When I spoke with Sharabi and asked him about Garrison's reference at the opening of the conference to Camp David Sharabi's comment was: "It was extemporaneous, and I thought unfortunate... He didn't mean that."

Then I asked Sharabi about Garrison's desire to bring Carter to this and the next conference and he responded: "Jimmy Carter has gone far beyond Camp David now. I wish he could have made it (to the last conference)."

Again asked if Camp David wasn't really the heart of what was being discussed at the conference and if discussions like this weren't contributing to building up a climate for another such debacle, Sharabi responded: "I didn't hear that, I didn't hear that at all. Our understanding of what he (Garrison) said is quite different."

Asked about why he suggested that the Jordanian monarch take the lead and be in the forefront of the conference, Sharabi indicated: "I back Hussein fully... He has made it very clear it is fine if the Palestinians want to negotiate on the same team with the Jordanians, the front seat is for the Palestinians."

Asked why he felt this way in view of the long history of Hashemite and Zionist cooperation, Sharabi indicated that he now thought the leadership of Jordan could be trusted by the Palestinians. Asked if he thought most Palestinians felt this way, Sharabi indicated "Yes, I do...as do most Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza."

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