

War or Peace

By MORTON YARMON

NEW YORK--War or peace in the Middle East may be determined to a large extent by the degree of firmness the United States shows against Soviet support of Arab belligerence in the area, an expert on Middle Eastern affairs has indicated.

Dr. George E. Gruen, Middle East specialist of the American Jewish Committee and lecturer on international politics in the Middle East at City College of the City University of New York, based his assertion on a review of events in the region during 1970. In "The United States, Israel, and the Middle East," an article in the 1971 AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK, Dr. Gruen maintains that "Washington's vacillation and indecision" during the first half of 1970 "encouraged a spirit of adventurism in Moscow that increased the danger of confrontation between the super-powers." The danger was diminished in the second half of the year, when firmness on the part of the United States "acted as a restraining and sobering influence on the Russians."

Dr. Gruen traces U.S. diplomacy during the first months of 1970, starting with President Nixon's "State of the World" message on February 18. The President acknowledged the potential threat to world peace of Soviet military activity in the Middle East and said the United States "would view any effort by the Soviet Union to seek predominance in the Middle East as a matter of grave concern." However, Dr. Gruen writes, the President weakened his warning by emphasizing that U.S. foreign policy requires "a more realistic assessment" of U.S. interests aimed at more limited commitments and "a sharing of responsibility" for peace. The President presumed, Dr. Gruen notes, that in the interest of avoiding a confrontation, the Russians would cooperate with the U.S. policy of "peace through partnership

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and accommodation of interests."

The impact of the President's warning was further weakened, according to Dr. Gruen, when The New York Times reported that unnamed Administration officials interpreted Mr. Nixon's message to mean that shipments of advanced warplanes to Egypt "or even an unanticipated dispatching of Soviet pilots to the United Arab Republic would be viewed in the context of the Arab-Israeli dispute and not the broader strategic problems of the area."

Dr. Gruen indicates that the Russians apparently interpreted this policy "as a green light for escalating their military involvement in the area." The Soviets began installing ground-to-air missiles and their pilots began flying operational missions for the Egyptians in April. "The Russians moved step by step, pausing each time to gauge the American reaction," Dr. Gruen asserts.

President Nixon decided to "hold in abeyance for now" Israel's request for additional Phantom and Skyhawk jets, because, Dr. Gruen writes, Egyptian President Nasser warned the United States of "serious consequences" to its interests in the Middle East if Israel received the planes. American oil industry executives expressed their concern, and State Department officials feared that sending more arms to Israel would damage the American image of "even-handedness" as well as hope for a political settlement as sought by Secretary of State William P. Rogers. Dr. Gruen adds that Washington hoped that if it limited arms shipments, Moscow might do likewise.

Instead, he notes, Moscow viewed Washington's withholding of planes for Israel not as a sign of restraint, but of indecision. In June, with Russian-piloted Egyptian planes clashing with Israeli fighters and Russian missiles downing Israeli Phantoms over the Suez Canal, U.S. posture on the Middle East reached a turning point.

Washington became alarmed that the situation might get out of hand, with a resumption of full-scale war leading to a military confrontation between the United States and Russia, Dr. Gruen comments. On July 1, President Nixon charged that Israel's "aggressive neighbors--Egypt and Syria" wanted to destroy Israel. He now asserted that the United States would give Israel military aid to counter Soviet support of Egypt. The United States also proposed a peace plan, and invited Soviet cooperation in bringing "this particular danger spot under control."

It was thought in the United States that the Soviets urged Egypt to agree to the U.S. peace initiative, Dr. Gruen maintains, because the Russians also were concerned that the situation along the Suez Canal "might get out of hand; that the White House was reasserting its authority in the Middle East crisis, and that Nixon might revert to his traditionally tougher anti-Communist stance."

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Similarly, Dr. Gruen writes, when Jordanian troops fought with commando groups and Syria moved 300 tanks into Jordan with Soviet concurrence, firm U.S. and Israeli reaction led the Syrians to withdraw their tanks. Israel partially mobilized its armed forces, and the United States reinforced its Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, prompting the Soviets to reduce the number of their ships in the area "as a sign to Washington that Moscow wished to avoid any confrontation."

There was talk of setting up a separate Palestinian nation, he says, but the Palestinians were divided among themselves as to who should lead them. King Hussein of Jordan opposed such a state, and it was felt by some Israeli and American officials that "as long as Hussein was in control and willing to consider a peace agreement with Israel," it was better to attempt to deal with him rather than "encourage dissident Palestinian elements."

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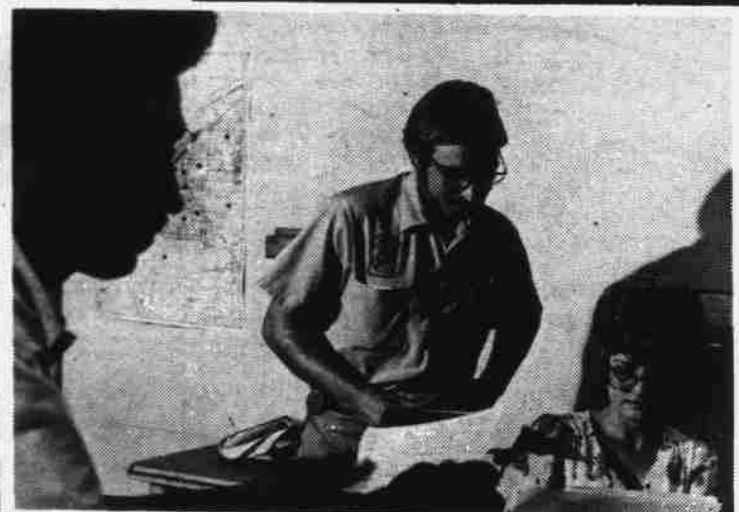
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