

The Organization of African Unity (O.A.U) and the Middle East Conflicts, 1963 to 1991:-A Historical Account

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Abstract

Since 1948 when the state of Israel was created, crisis has become a recurring decimal in the Middle East. The crisis has remained an issue of international discourse. Indeed, the conflict has continued to this day in spite of the continued global peace initiatives by supranational Organizations such as the United Nations Organization(UNO) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU).Then too, countries such as the United States of America and the defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republic(now Russia) made spirited efforts to end the conflict. This essay examines the role the role of OAU in the conflicts between 1963 and 1991. The Organization of African Unity (O.A.U), now known as African Union (AU since July 2001) represented Africa. The Organization of African Unity was originally neutral, but by 1967, she changed from its initial neutrality to taking sides. This paper discusses the role of Africa, through its organization - the O.A.U, in the Middle East conflicts. The paper explores the factors that brought Africa into the conflict and their consequences for Africa. The paper concludes that the crisis puts Africa's supranational organization into a dilemma. The methodology adopted for this study is secondary source of data collection, while thematic and historical analytical approach was adopted.

Key Words: Organization, Africa, Conflicts/Crises, Middle East and Unity.

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I. Introduction

The history of the Arabs in Africa has been marked by a number of contradictions. The Arabs have been both conquerors and liberators, traders in slaves and purveyors of new ideas. With the Arabs came both Islam and commerce. Really, trade and Islam have been companions throughout much of modern African history. However, the relationship between Black Africa and the Arabs has always been underscored by mutual suspicion. This suspicion is century's old, dating back to the time when Moslem Arabs, organized slave raids into sub-Saharan Africa, and to proselytize itspeople.¹ Instructively, the closeness between the two peoples could be said to have its origin in the Pan-African Movement of the early and mid-fifties of the 20th century. The rapport sought to fight against European colonialism and create an African identity for forging unity and solidarity among all African peoples irrespective of differences of race and culture. For many years, Black Africans and Arabs have worked together in a way, that earlier had been thought impossible. Yet in spite of such commendable cooperation, old suspicion has lingered, although the leaders themselves, finding the subject of Blacks and Arabs too delicate, have generally steered away from open discussion of it. Both sides have tried to give, at least a semblance of unity and brotherliness. Indeed, African-Arab relations started in 1967 after the Six Day War. But the relationship reached a peak in 1973, immediately after the Arab-Israeli war(October War or Yom Kippur), when as a result of pressures from the Arab League, nearly all African countries broke relations with Israel to demonstrate their support for the Arab and Palestinian cause.² Since then, mutual suspicion has increased, while African leaders have begun to voice openly their reservations, about Arab attitudes towards African problems. Indeed, the Organization of African Unity's position in relation to the Middle East crisis is unique.

Background Information On The Organization Of African Unity And The Middle East People

The Organization of African Unity currently known as African Union was founded at a time when African leaders were experiencing their first taste of independence, and were anxious to consolidate their leadership. Across the continent, they saw the danger posed by the divisions of language, culture and religion; by the economic inequalities and controversies over boundaries arbitrarily drawn by the colonial powers. It quickly became clear that a high degree of co-operation was necessary among the fledging African states, if the

continent was to survive as a viable economic and political entity. It was to achieve this co-operation that the O.A.U was established.

Understandably, however, there were considerable differences of opinion as to how African unity could best be attained. Thus, at the beginning of 1963, the African states were divided into three main political and ideological groups. They were the Casablanca, the Monrovia and the Brazzaville Twelve.³ This polarization of the Pan-African movement was found at the All-African Peoples' conference of Tunis in Tunisia, which took place from the 25th to the 30th January, 1960. Despite these difficulties, there was a continuing anxiety to bring all independent African states, together and each of the three groups made frequent attempts to end the split. Subsequently, on 22 May, 1963, the Casablanca and Monrovia factions assembled in the Ethiopian capital of Addis-Ababa, where they agreed on a compromised formula for achieving African unity. With the exception of Morocco and Togoland, all thirty-two sovereign nations of Africa, were represented by their Heads- of- State or Government. A charter institutionalizing the movement for Africa Unity was adopted, and subsequently ratified by the participating governments on 26 May 1963.⁴ Under the charter, a permanent body named the Organization of African Unity(O.A.U) was launched. Thus, the year 1963, has been called Africa's Unity year.

On the other hand, the Arab World comprises all countries and people living on the expanse of land, that extends from the Gulf of the Atlantic Ocean, which formed the League of Arab States in 1945, or have since been admitted into that organization.⁵The term 'Middle East' is used in this essay to include what used to be called the Near East as well as most of the Middle East proper. It covers Turkey and Iran, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Trans-Jordan (Israel and Jordan), Iraq, Egypt, the Sudan and the whole of the Arabian Peninsula-the states of Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.⁶This area is characterized by the predominance of Islam, the identification of Arabic-speaking people with an Arab cultural and ethnic identity. The area has the pervasive economic influence of oil and natural gas production, arid environment and widespread political turbulence and conflict which have constantly involved outside powers. In general, the Arab Middle East is sparsely populated with all, except Lebanon and the small Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, having population densities of less than 65 persons per square kilometre.⁷ The Middle East extends over several kilometres and is bounded by the Mediterranean, the Sahara and the Mountains of the Taurus range, Kurdistan and Western Iran. This vast area was integrated into a centralized political system for a brief period between the years 750AD and 950AD under the Omayyads and the first Abbasids,⁸ and then superficially as a result of the Ottoman conquest.

Zionism, Creation Of The State And The Genesis Of Middle East Crisis

The contest for land between the Israelites and their neighbours dates back to biblical times. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD, following the Jews' revolt against the increasingly insensitive administration of Emperor Nero, the Jews were dispersed to different parts of the globe. Consequently, the idea of Zionism arose for the redemption of the Jewish people, in its ancestral homeland. This is rooted in the continuous longing and deep attachment to the land of Israel which have been an inherent part of Jewish existence in the Diaspora throughout the centuries.

Political Zionism emerged in response to the continued oppression and persecution of the Jews, in Eastern Europe, and the increasing disillusionment with their formal emancipation in Western Europe. These had neither put an end to discrimination nor led to the integrating of the Jews into their local societies. This state of affairs found formal expression in the establishment of the Zionist Organization in 1897 at the first Zionist Congress, convened by Theodor Hezel in Basel, Switzerland.⁹The Zionist Movement's programme contained both ideological and practical elements, aimed at facilitating and promoting the return of the Jews to the land; and carrying out the social, cultural, economic and political revival of Jewish national life. Additionally, attaining an internationally recognized and legally secured home for the Jewish people in its historical homeland, where the Jews would be free from persecution and able to develop their own lives and identity.

And so, to actualize this, in July 1922, the League of Nations entrusted Great Britain with the Mandate for Palestine, recognizing the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine. The mandate called on Britain to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine.¹⁰ Motivated by Zionism and encouraged by British "sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations," as communicated by Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour, successive waves of immigrants arrived between 1919 and 1939 from Russia, Poland and Germany.

The inability of Britain to reconcile the conflicting demands of the Jewish and Arab communities led the British government in April 1947 to request that the "Question of Palestine" be placed on the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly. The Assembly voted in November 1947 for the establishment of two states in the area west of the Jordan River, one Jewish and one Arab. The Jewish community accepted the partition plan while the Arabs rejected it. When the British mandate over Palestine (land of Israel) ended on 14 May 1948, the Jewish population in the land numbered some 650,000, comprising an organized community with well-developed political, social and economic institutions.¹¹ Thus, so, what had been built was a nation in every sense, and indeed a state in everything but name. Nonetheless, the state of Israel was proclaimed only on 14

May 1948.¹² But less than 24 hours later, the regular armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq invaded the country. The invasion forced Israel to defend the sovereignty it had regained in its ancestral homeland, and which had been recognized by the international community. In what became known as the War of Independence, the newly formed poorly equipped Israel Defence Forces (IDF) repulsed the invaders in fierce intermittent fighting which lasted for some 15 months, thus marking the beginning of constant conflicts between Israel and the Arabs.

Organization Of African Unity And The Middle East Crisis

During Israel's second decade of existence 1958 -1968, emphasis was placed on relations with the rest of the world. Foreign relations expanded steadily, as close ties were developed with nearly all the countries of Africa. The period was marked by extensive programmes of cooperation, as hundreds of Israeli physicians, engineers, teachers, agronomists, irrigation experts and youth organizers shared know-how and experience with people in developing countries of Africa. But these cordialities between Israel and Africa was weakened following the outbreak of hostilities in the Middle East region.

The prospect of another decade of relative tranquility became increasingly remote, with the escalation of Arab terrorist raids across Egyptian and Jordanian borders. Also, there were persistent Syrian artillery bombardments of agricultural settlements in Northern Galilee, and massive military build-ups by the neighbouring Arab states. When Egypt moved large numbers of troops into the Sinai Desert in May 1967, ordered the United Nations Peace-keeping forces deployed since 1957 out of the area, re-imposed the blockade of the Straits of Tiran, and entered into a military alliance with Jordan, Israel found itself faced by hostile Arab armies on all fronts.

And so, having failed to restore the arrangements agreed upon following the 1956 Sinai campaign, Israel invoked its inherent right to self-defence. Subsequently, Israel launched on 5 June 1967, a pre-emptive strike against Egypt in the south, followed by a counter attack against Jordan in the east and routing of Syrian forces entrenched on the Golan Heights in the north. At the end of six days of fighting, Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian forces had been routed on all fronts. It was a well-coordinated air and land attack. The previous ceasefire lines were replaced by new ones with Judea, Samaria, the Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the Golden Heights and the West bank and East bank of the Suez Canal under Israel's control.¹³ Besides, Jerusalem, which had been divided between Israel and Jordan since 1949, was reunified.

In all, relations between Africa and the Arab world took off on a bad note after the Six-Day War in June. However, between 1967 and 1971, African support for the Arab course was far from unanimous. Hence, the year 1967 was a watershed in Africa's involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Countries like Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, Mali, Guinea, Tanzania and Zambia were strongly in favour of the Arab cause, while countries like Nigeria, Senegal, Chad, Niger, Kenya and Ethiopia were moving in that direction. On the other hand, Benin, Botswana, Ivory Coast, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi and Rwanda were more on the Israeli side. The remaining countries still hesitated to take a clear position.¹⁴ The occupation of Sinai (part of Egyptian territory) was viewed by Africa as an offence against the O.A.U charter, which affirms the territorial integrity of African sovereign states. The African position started to harden after the adoption of the United Nation's Security Council resolution 242 which demanded Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, and appealed to all member states to ensure a strict compliance and implementation of that resolution. Guinea led the way by severing diplomatic relations with Israel immediately after the June 1967 war. Soon after, nine black African countries broke off diplomatic relations with Israel between June 1967 and October 1973,¹⁵ with Somali never having diplomatic ties with Israel.

At the end of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, a prolonged and bloody war of attrition followed in spite of the truce. Sufficient Arab unity was restored to give the fourth Arab-Israeli war a markedly different outcome from its predecessors. Indeed, the three years of relative calm along the Israeli-Arab borders was shattered on Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish year). In their coordinated surprise-attack on two fronts, Egypt and Syria were initially successful. Thus, the Egyptian and Syrian attack of Israel by 2.00pm on 6 October 1973, with the Egyptian army cross the Suez canal and Syrian troops penetrating the Golan Heights took Israel by surprise.¹⁶ Militarily, the recovery was rapid, after initial reverses, in which the Egyptian forces destroyed the Bar-levline on the Suez canal and secured a bridgehead in Sinai, while Syrian forces threatened Northern Galilee.

During the next three weeks, the Israel Defence Forces, reinforced by a massive airlift of American arms, turned the tide and repulsed the attackers, crossing the West bank of the Suez Canal into Egypt and advancing to within 32 kilometres of the Syrian capital - Damascus.¹⁷ In the following two years, disengagement-of-forces agreement between Israel and Egypt and between Egypt and Syria were signed. Accordingly, Israel withdrew from parts of the territories captured during the war. Nonetheless, despite the Israeli victories in the latter part of the war, the performance of the Arab armies had been sufficient to destroy

the myth of Israeli military invincibility. Generally, the October 1973 war resulted in a marked deterioration in Israel's international position, especially in Africa.

Before the October war, African countries, had become disenchanted with Israel, for a number of reasons ranging from a growing belief, that Israel had become a "mini-bully" in the Middle East; to strains in the relations between Israeli technical assistance personnel in individual countries and the authorities, of those, countries. By the time war broke out in October 1973, a trend was definitely under-way that implied a growing African solidarity with the Arab cause in the Middle East. During the war, the Arab oil producers announced a dramatic increase in the price of oil to the allies of Israel. This placed a severe burden on the developing countries of Africa.

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) now known and called African Union(AU), comprises of 55 independent African states as members. The organization played a significant role in inducing its members to conduct their foreign policy in a way, which many of them could not otherwise have been expected to do. And that was over the breach of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1973. Hence, when the October War started, twenty (20) more black African states broke off diplomatic ties with Israel. Basically, by the end of 1973, only Malawi and Mauritius had diplomatic relations Israel.

During the Arab-Israeli Wars, Israel captured the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and incorporated the territories into Israel. Hence, in early December 1987, riots broke out in the Gaza Strip, accompanied by violent confrontations between Palestinians and the occupying forces of Israel. This was the start of what became known as the Palestinian Intifada or uprising.¹⁸ The Intifada was a sustainable attempt by the inhabitants of the occupied territories to throw off the yoke of Israeli occupation by means of mass protest and non-cooperation, after more than twenty years of subjugation. In the Israeli-Palestinian confrontations, African states were sharply divided in their positions. While some maintained diplomatic relations, others were neutral, and some had no information of their position with Palestinian liberation Organization (PLO).

By 1990, with the Intifada into its third year, it seemed as if the frustrations of all the players with endless round of talks had reached their crescendo. The prospects for peace in the Middle East had never seemed bleaker. Besides the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s; in 1990, Iraqi forces occupied Kuwait and the world was torn asunder. All the major actors in the Middle East were called upon to take sides. The Iraqi aggression and attempted annexation of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, and her refusal to comply with the United Nations resolutions to withdraw from Kuwait led to the Gulf War. On 24 February 1991, the coalition forces began a combined air and land campaign to force Saddam Hussein, the then Iraqi leader out of Kuwait.¹⁹ But the Iraqi leader, in his characteristically exaggerated rhetoric proclaimed that The mother of all battle had begun.²⁰

However, the coalition forces by 27 February 1991, completely defeated the Iraqi occupation armies in Kuwait; in what might with considerable justification, be called the mother of all defeat. In the Gulf Crisis, members of the Organization of African Unity were either pro or against Kuwait and United Nations' Coalition Forces. For instance, Algeria, Libya and Sudan were pro-Iraq but of a low profile, while Egypt, Tunisia and Nigeria etc contributed troops to the coalition forces.

II. Conclusion

Since the creation of the state of Israel, conflict in the Middle East region has become a steady occurrence. This crisis area has not only attracted world attention but has also involved the active participation of the super-powers, the United States of America, and the defunct Soviet Union(now represented by Russia), and supranational organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity. It could be argued that the sustenance of the Middle East crisis is anchored on the continued influence of external powers. This is informed by their individual and peculiar national interests in the Middle East - the protection or promotion of their customership in the Middle East oil industries. Conflict is sustained in the system because Palestine is a typical paradigm of "culture conflict," the Arabs feel that defeat is an unfortunate incident of "shame" which can only be made good through sufficient and reciprocal vengeance.

On the other hand, Israel has a background replete with historical trauma which precipitates a sense of isolation and promotes fanatic attachment to self-reliance. The passion and dedication with which views are held and enunciated are among the principal forces impelling the parties to act upon or resist each other. The recurring crisis in the Middle East is however, not mainly due to the Arab-Israeli conflict created by possible eastern bigotry and imperialist greed, it is part of the difficult painful process and increasing dangerous antithesis between the worlds' rich and poor nations. On the whole, the Middle East crisis which had become chronic and endemic like a disease defying all medication has placed Africa's supranational organization on a crossroads.

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