

PERSPECTIVE ON THE PERSIAN GULF WAR

Same Words, Different Languages



The Western and Eastern views of this confrontation are far apart. The schism is growing deeper.

By SARI NUSSEIBEH

JERUSALEM—At the risk of some oversimplification, one can distinguish between a “Western” and “Eastern” point of view regarding the Persian Gulf War. The United States government would on the whole subscribe to the Western view, while we Palestinians would subscribe to the Eastern view. The first essential difference between them is that the Western view regards the present war as the inevitably successful culmination of a political effort or process, but the Eastern regards it as a failure of diplomacy.

According to the first view, aggression against the United Nations Charter and against international legitimacy in the Middle East occurred on Aug. 2, 1990, and is geographically confined to the Persian Gulf region. According to the second view, this aggression occurred much earlier, not least since the creation of Israel and displacement of the Palestinians in 1948, and its geographic borders include other regions in the Middle East.

In the first view, there is no “connection” between the gulf problems and the Palestinian or Lebanese problems. In the second view, problems in the Middle East are geographically, historically, religiously and culturally related, and

the effort made to deny linkage between them is itself an affirmation of linkage. In the first view, the United States went to war because it wanted to establish peace in the region. In the second view, it is because the United States rejected a comprehensive peace conference on the region.

According to the first view, 28 countries are carrying out the planning and operation of “Operation Desert Storm” and U.S. military involvement is independent of its alliance with Israel. According to the second view, the United States is single-handedly leading this operation and carrying its main brunt. Israel’s military alliance with the United States makes it a major partner in the operation.

To the West, the operation is a justified implementation of Security Council resolutions and is a moral war in defense of human principles and civilized values. It is the first genuine activation of the United Nations in resolving world conflicts. To the East, this operation is a selective implementation of U.N. resolutions: an immoral war and a technologically sophisticated manifestation of the laws of the jungle. It constitutes a blatant exploitation of the United Nations on behalf of the use of force by the United States.

In the first view, the operation is being carried out in laboratory-like conditions that will surgically eliminate a political aberration, thus preparing the ground for stability and peace in the region, even a “new world order.” The second view agrees that there will be a U.S. military victory, but believes that it

will also spark a fire spreading beyond any possible means of containment, thus driving the region into instability, chaos and violence for a long time to come.

In the first view, the United States will be able in the post-crisis situation to address the Palestinian problem and to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the second view, the United States will, through this war, minimize its credibility to Arabs and Palestinians as a peacemaker and will in any case not exert any pressure on Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967 (called for in United Nations Security Council Resolution 242). Rather, if anything, it will try to implement a settlement on Israeli terms.

It is a small surprise, given all of these differences, that there is a basic miscommunication between East and West. There are essentially two different languages. The words may be the same but the political vocabulary is totally different. And as the war continues to take its toll, the further apart the vocabularies become and the more difficult afterwards it will be to mend bridges.

Ideally, a new world order could really develop, an order in which the Lithuanian peoples’ struggle against Soviet hegemony, as one example among many, would invite the same international sanctions and efforts as the usurpation of Kuwait by Iraq, or as the usurpation of Palestinian national rights by Israel. But for such a new world to develop, an immediate resort to negotiations and diplomacy is needed.

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