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Land for peace IV: the sorry sequel

BYLINE: Douglas J. Feith

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HIGHLIGHT: THE theme of the Bush administration's Arab-Israeli diplomatic initiative is "land for peace." The concept: the Arab powers would not again make war against Israel if Israel withdrew from a substantial portion of the territories it acquired in the Six Day War.

THE theme of the Bush administration's Arab-Israeli diplomatic initiative is "land for peace." The concept: the Arab powers would not again make war against Israel if Israel withdrew from a substantial portion of the territories it acquired in the Six Day War.

Working on the assumption that Arab objections to Zionism are not a matter of principle, Western statesmen have, over many years, tried to buy off these objections through territorial concessions. They have failed, which suggests that they have misconstrued the Arabs.

Without a valid idea of why the Arabs and the Jews are fighting, U.S. peacemaking efforts, no matter how intense and well-motivated, are unlikely to allay the grievances that underlie the 100-year conflict between Arabs and Jews over Palestine. Land-for-peace is less a formula for progress than a means of belittling the conviction of successive generations of Arabs that Palestine is an Arab land in which the Zionists, like the Crusaders of years past, are temporary usurpers.

In September 1921, Britain, acting as trustee under the Palestine Mandate, "withheld" the Mandate's Jewish National Home provisions from "the territories lying between the Jordan (River) and the eastern boundary of Palestine." This area, known as Transjordan, amounted to 78 percent of the total territory of Palestine. Britain placed it under the administration of the Emir Abdullah, grandfather of the present King Hussein of Jordan, as part of a bargain in which Abdullah pledged to suppress anti-Zionist activity directed at the Jewish settlements in the rump of Palestine lying west of the Jordan. Let us call this Land-for-Peace I.

In November 1947, the UN General Assembly recommended partitioning western Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state. The Jewish state would not have included western Galilee, Jaffa or even a land bridge from the Mediterranean coast to Jerusalem. Thus, the proposed Jewish state would have been much smaller than the Israel defined by the armistice lines negotiated at the end of the 1948-49 war. But the Arab states were not to be appeased with an extra slice of Palestine. They formally rejected the 1947 UN partition plan, which we can call Land-for-Peace II.

Thereupon Britain, with strong support from elements of the U.S. State Department, launched Land-for-Peace III: coercive diplomacy aimed at getting the Jews to relinquish the Negev desert and Haifa as a basis for seeking Arab consent to a Jewish State.

On June 6, 1948, three weeks after Israel declared independence and was promptly attacked by the armed forces of six Arab states, a State Department memorandum reported that the "British believed that it might be possible to secure Arab acquiescence to the establishment of a Jewish State if there were boundary modifications particularly in the Negev."

ASSUMING THAT the Arabs were concerned primarily with the size and shape of Israel, rather than the fact of its existence, the British asserted: "A Jewish State lying across their lines of communication (in the Negev) had been one of the chief causes of concern to the Arab leaders."

Less than two weeks later, on June 18, 1948, the U.S. embassy in London cabled: "Iraqi defense minister advised British ambassador (in) Baghdad that ultimate fate Haifa is most important Palestine problem. He expressed view that if Haifa cannot be in Arab state it must be free port; otherwise pipeline would have to be relaid through Syria and Lebanon because although Iraqi economy is dependent on oil royalties, Iraq 'could not tolerate outlet for its oil being in Jewish state.' British ambassador commented to Foreign Office that 'it becomes more than ever clear that Haifa is sorest of all Arab points

... ' " British and American officials also strongly argued in those days that if Israel kept the Negev, the interests of peace would require it to give western Galilee to the Arabs. ... '

The Arab powers did not at the time promise to accept Israel if they obtained a larger piece of Palestine. When they attempted militarily to prevent Israel from coming into existence and when Arab leaders said that the Jews had no right to a state in Palestine, this was interpreted in effect as haggling (though not generally by Israel's Jews, whom history conditioned to heed fatal threats). "Land for peace" in 1948, like its Bush administration variation today, was based not on unambiguous Arab promises to conclude peace with Israel, but on a priori speculations by Western diplomats about which Jewish concessions would allow the Arabs to make peace.

So it went. And so it goes. Now if Israel would only give up the West Bank ...

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