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The Middle East: Prospects for settlement and stability

Abstract

Extract:

A timely conference entitled The Middle East: Prospects for Settlement and Stability was organised by ANU's Centre for Middle Eastern & Central Asian Studies and convened on 7th and 8th October, 1994.

Keywords

conference, Middle East, social, economic, cultural divide

CONFERENCE REPORT

THE MIDDLE EAST: PROSPECTS FOR SETTLEMENT & STABILITY

A Conference Report by Maggie Grey

A timely conference entitled "The Middle East: Prospects for Settlement and Stability" was organised by ANU's Centre for Middle Eastern & Central Asian Studies and convened on 7th and 8th October, 1994. The conference was well attended but sadly marred by the absence of the keynote speaker, Dr Hanan Ashrawi, whose mother passed away two days before the conference began.

Mr Tim Fischer, Leader of the [Australian] National Party opened proceedings and briefly outlined a history of Australian-Middle Eastern connections including the curious fact that between 1937-41, an area of the Kimberleys in Western Australia had been mooted as a site of possible immigration and settlement for Jewish refugees.

Dr Avi Shlaim of Oxford University spoke on "Israeli Politics after the Jericho-Gaza Settlement" stressing the different roles and perceptions of Israel's political elite; arguing that while Rabin was confrontationist and saw diplomacy as "war by other means", Peres was conciliatory and Shamir was quite empathic with a clear vision of the political and economic future. Dr Amin Saikal, conference convenor, standing in for Dr Ashrawi, spoke on Palestinian perspectives of the post-settlement process.

The question of Islamic Radicalism was discussed by Dr Sohrab Shahabi, Dir. Gen. of the Institute for Political & International Affairs, Tehran and by Dr Ahmad Shboul of Sydney University. In the afternoon, Dr. Jim Piscatori, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, spoke on "Islam and Democratisation" and Dr Amin Saikal on "Democracy or Veiled Authoritarianism?".

Dr Samina Yasmeen, University of Western Australia, spoke on gender issues in Palestinian politics: on the importance of women in maintaining social welfare systems, boycotting the Israeli economy and unifying the nation. She warned that with limited autonomy, many Palestinian women who were now used to the public sphere, may suffer from authoritarianism within the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the anti-feminist ideologies of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

There was a very wide range of seminar papers and workshops delivered under the general headings of Regional Conflict; Islamic Radicalism; Social and Economic Development; and Australia, New Zealand and the Middle East. Under Regional Conflict, Dr Caroline Graham (Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Technology, Sydney) admitted to a pessimistic reading of the many obstacles, particularly economic, to "real" Palestinian autonomy. Matthew Gray (MA, Macquarie University) attributed the 1994 Yemeni civil war to three broad factors: personal and ideological differences of leadership between north and south; an economic and cultural divide between the two populations and the negative effects of Yemen's refusal to endorse Coalition plans for Iraq in 1990-91. Dr Kamran Mofid, Coventry

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University, spoke convincingly of the need for much greater regional economic cooperation and integration to offset the regional history of high levels of industrial duplication, particularly in petrochemicals, and the danger of reliance on the oil economy. He argued that not only was this necessary at the purely economic level but that it was essential to prevent further regional conflict.

Under the subdivision of Islamic Radicalism, Anne Ellison (Department of Politics, Melbourne University) spoke of feminist criticisms of Radical Islam and of using a psychoanalytic approach to interpret the positioning of women as cultural icons of Islamic virtue (much as this technique has been used to reinterpret fundamentalism within Protestant Christianity).

In the section on Social and Economic Development; Ms Jacky Angus, (Faculty of Asian Studies, ANU), a former editor for the Egyptian *Al-Ahram Weekly* Newspaper, spoke of the nature of journalism and freedom of the press within Egypt. With recent (June, 1995) legislation greatly limiting press freedom, the paper was useful in delineating many of the issues involved in the construction of Middle Eastern 'news'. Under the same section, Rod Skilbeck (Department of Political Science, Melbourne University), spoke on the various threats to women by the Algerian Salvation Front (FIS) and of the possible ways by which women might combat these threats.

The conference was, despite the largely pessimistic nature of a majority of papers, enthusiastically attended. The geographical isolation of Australia from the Middle East was more than compensated for by the vigour of debate and discussion by lecturers and audience. Papers are being published and will be available from the ANU by September, 1995.