Teh Arab Israeli Conflict Essay, Research Paper

How accurate is the standard portrayal of Arab-Israeli conflict has been the small and surrounded Jewish nation facing up and repelling overwhelming Muslim aggressors?

The standard portrayal of Israel as a Jewish nation facing up and repelling overwhelming Muslim aggressors in the Arab-Israeli conflict is misleading, merely a perception. It placed Israel in the light of the victim, simply reacting to circumstances, whereas history has proven that this is not always the case. It assumes that the conflict is homogenous throughout its existence, consistent in that the Jews were fighting off Muslims, when there is the issue of the Palestinians as well.

To challenge the standard portrayal, one chooses to look first to the first four Arab-Israeli wars, particularly the Six-Day War of 1967, and the resulting controversies, which would allow one to understand the precipitation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But certain premises will have to be addressed. The term Muslim is misleading. Muslim refers to the people of Islamic faith, and whereas it is true that the state religion of the states surrounding Israel is Islam, the people are not homogenous, with the same religion. In accord to the term Arab-Israeli conflict , it will be more accurate to address them as the Arabs. The Arabs are the people who regardless of their religion or faith originate from an Arab state, or a member state often League of Arab States, who inhabit any Arab territory that was any part of the Islamic nation… Arabs are not necessarily Muslims, a substantial amount of people living in these states are Christians.

The same applies to the Israelis. Though it was st out to be a Jewish homeland, some of her people are Christians or even Muslim. Religion, like it has been throughout history, is merely the spark, one that is used for the parties involved to meet their own purposes. To say that Israel is surrounded by the Arabs is extremely true. She shared borders with Egypt, Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia (the last to a lesser extent.)

From the beginning it seemed that Israel had been in the position of strength, particularly when the strongest nation, the United States of America, was supporting her. In the Palestine War 1948-49, the war to Israel s independence, Israel defeated the combined forces of the Arab states, and made considerable territorial gains, which were not included under the United Nations partition. In light of the standard portrayal, it is true that the very location of Israel, a Jewish nation against the hostile Islamic states, makes it susceptible to attacks by the Arab nations. However it is not as vulnerable as implied. If anything they were military superiors.

It is a fallacy to conclude as such from the evidence of a war. But in the three other major Arab-Israeli wars, Israel had emerged the victor, regardless of the margin by which they won and by what means. The Sinai Campaign, or the Suez War of 1956, saw Israel co-operating with the British and the French to invade Egypt covering territory to as far as the bank of the Suez canal. In this case, it becomes questionable as to whether the Arab state of Egypt was the aggressor and whether Israel was acting in defence, facing up and repelling opposition . Under international law at the point in time, the priority priciple stated that the first to attack was the aggressor, but this is difficult to determine. Israel was given the right of defence as per article 51 of the UN Charter [1], as the Egyptians had declared their plan for hegemony by eliminating Israel, and their attacks from the fedayeen bases However this might not be sufficient to justify their actions in 1956. The premise for self defence is necessity, yet Israel had collaborated with the British and the French months before their attack. Majority of countries condemned the Israelis actions as they found that the invasion of the Sinai peninsula was disproportionate to the attacks that Israel had suffered from the fedayeen bases. It took four months of bargaining and international pressure, before Israel relinquished the territory she had gained.

Perhaps the most controversial of the wars was the June (Six Day) War of 1967. It was noted that It had long been Israel s practice, whenever it judged that Arab raids had reached an intolerable level, to retaliate massively and that even unconventional threats would …elicit cunning and violent preemption or the most terrible retaliation , and this is particularly true from the 1967 war. Israel did so on November 13, 1966, attacking the moderate Jordan which led to international censure and on April 7, 1967 shooting down of six Syrian planes. On both occassions, the Arab nations had not launch any major attack, besides the normal border disputes. The Israelis had done so on the grounds that Egypt and Jordan had received large contingents of troops from the other Arab states and on June 5, 1967, made the first strike. Proving their military might and superiority over their neighbours, and disproving that implication that Israel was weak because of its size, Israel achieved complete military victory six days later, occupying an area four times greater than the area of Israel before the war.

The controversy thus arises. Does Israel have the right to pre-emptive attack? This is disputed over articles 2(4) and 51 in the charter, as the same clauses could be used to defend both the Arabs and the Israelis. [2] By the two above mentioned articles, the Israeli action is taken as defensive actions of a beleaguered State against military measures… threatening its… independence However, a narrow reading of the two articles would also support the case that Israel s pre-emptive strike amounted to an act of aggression. The war thus disproved several notions suggested by the standard portrayal of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Firstly, Israel may be surrounded by the Arab nations, but this held no consequence to her military strength. In fact, it might have helped her built on her military prowess as a tool for survival. Secondly, the Arab states had not been the aggressors, or at least, did not declare war nor draw first blood, and therefore the Israelis cannot be said to be repelling invading forces. Thirdly, if anything, the Arabs were definitely not overwhelming. It would be ironic to point out that it was the Israelis forces that was overwhelming. The Israelis had gained two major things in this war: security and a bargaining chip, land for peace and recognition.

The October War of 1973 was won on a slight margin on Israel s part. On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel. In this war, we would have to concede that there is some truth in the standard portaryal. The Arabs proved here that they were capable of co-operation and a well co-ordinated attack, and this offence was overwheliming enough for the Israelis to come close to losing have it not been for the American airlift which brought them ammunition. The Arabs however won a psychological and diplomatic victory. It was this war that eventually led to the peace talks between Israel and the Arab nations, particularly Egypt. The war, however brings out another point. Israel will not, and debatably will never, be overwhelmed by the Arabic forces, because they have the support of other countries, notably the United States. The protection of the international community means that the threat that the Arabs posed was not as calamitous as it may seemed initially.

We could then look to broader perspectives. It was said that the assumption that universal and impalcable hostility on the part of its neighbours was never completely accurate .The Arab nations were adaptable to their own diplomatic aims and Israel was able to form relations with Jordan, Iran and Turkey. Moreover by the 1990s, the threat was almost non-existent. Israel made her peace with Egypt over the Camp David Accordes in 1979. In July 1988, King Hussein of Jordan reliquished all claims to the West Bank and by 1994, the state of war between the two countries was ended. The Lebanon War of 1982 led to peace table talks with Lebanon. By 1994, several other Arab states had opened low level relations with the Jewish state. The state of perpetual war had ended, and it is suspected that Israel had gained from it. It had brought the Jews who had come to Israel from all over the world together, united in their efforts against the Arabs. It had brought them world-wide recognition, and economic support particularly from the States. It was even argued that Israel might have prolonged the conflict in order to gain more foothold in the Middle East. If so, it defeats the perception that Israel is a country struggling for survival against the Arab nations. It becomes Israel using the Arab nations for her struggle for survival.

A further confusion that would shed more light of the standard portrayal would be the Palestinian question. These are two levels of wars and conflicts that Israel faced, with the Arab nations and against the Palestinians. Particularly over the Lebanon War of 1982, the issue was that of the Israelis against the Palestinians refugees, loosely represented by the Palestinians Liberation Organisation (PLO). Operation Peace for Galilee, the attack on Lebanon, was a classic example of Israel s aggression. This means i) the Middle East conflict is not always a case of Israel against the Arabs and ii) Israel is not always a defender. In this case, we question, should this level of conflict be considered under Arab -Israeli conflict , given that the Palestinians are not Arabs? It was suggested that the antagonism of the rest of the Arab states is a by product of the Palestinian cause and moreover, some Arab states were drawn to the conflict because of this cause, a perfect example being Lebanon.

Another fallacy in the standard portrayal is implicit grouping together of all the Arab nations as a single entity against Israel and therefore creating the impression that they are formidable. As a combined entity, no doubt they would be a force to reckon with as proved by the October War. However the Arabs were hardly united. Their own national interest must always come first. An example could be the case of Israeli attack on Syria. It took Egypt a long time, and continual pressure from the Arabdom before she decided to apply pressure on Israel, and even so, half-heartedly.

Therefore the standard portrayal of the Arab Israeli conflict is hardly accurate. It is romanticising the truth, and is bias towards Israel. It thus has to be re-evaluated, and take in other cosiderations.

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[1] Article 51 0f the UN Charter states that Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations…

[2] Article 2(4) states that All Members shall refarin in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state…