

Abdur Rob Khan and Golam Mostafa

MIDDLE-EAST SITUATION SINCE CAMP DAVID: IMPLICATION FOR BANGLADESH*

An arc of crisis stretches along the shores of the Indian Ocean, with fragile social and political structures in a region.....threatened with fragmentation.

—Zbigniew Brezezinski¹

The above statement made by the National Security Adviser of the former Carter Administration adequately sums up the serious nature of the Middle East situation in the late seventies and early eighties. The decade of the seventies had witnessed the continuation of intra-Arab feuds and hostilities between the Arab states and Israel. On the other hand, unity among the Arab states, however fragile, reached its zenith during the October 1973 War and its immediate aftermath. This was manifest in the heightened level of political awareness, flow of Arab assistance to Egypt, and the use of oil as a political weapon. But centrifugal forces soon set in and intra-Arab differences exacerbated the volatile and unstable nature of the Middle East scene. The religion-based civil strife in Lebanon and subsequent

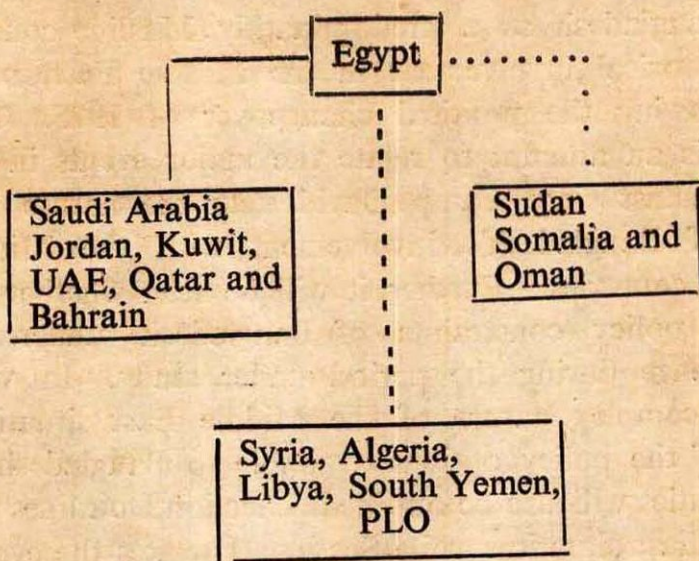
*The paper is an expanded version of an earlier seminar paper prepared for the BIISS in 1980.

1. See *Time* 3 January 1979, p. 4

Syrian involvement, among others, contributed to this trend initially. The process, however, was precipitated by Sadat's unilateral peace overtures in November 1977 and the resultant Camp David Agreement². The Camp David process marked significant qualitative departure from the previous peace efforts in many respects. It was the first time that an Arab state, a contender to Israel at that, moved to recognize Israel. Secondly, the peace initiative came from within the Middle East rather than from any external sources. Thirdly, it was the first time that Soviet Union was not involved in the Middle East peace process while the United States, as a guarantor of the peace treaty, achieved an in-built mechanism for her direct participation in the Middle East arena.

And significantly enough the intra-Arab alignment pattern became more pronounced. Syria, Algeria, Libya, South Yemen and the PLO reacted sharply by snapping diplomatic relations with and boycotting Egypt in all forums. They came to be known as 'Steadfastness and Confrontation' group. Iraq was initially with this group but later withdrew. Moderates reacted mildly, though they broke relations with Egypt. On the other hand, there were few countries who supported Egypt in her peace move. The alignment pattern as reaction to the Camp David Agreement may be shown in Figure 1.

2. See *Keesing's Contemporary Archive* Vol xxv, 1979, p.p 29941—29956



Index.

- Moderate opposition.
- - - - - Opposed vehemently.
- Supported.

Thus the Camp David Agreement set a new peace and conflict process that influenced the behaviour of not only the Middle Eastern countries but also the external powers that had a stake in the region, direct or indirect. One immediate impact was on the foreign policy making of the Muslim countries of the world which, hitherto, could provide blanket support to the Arab and the Palestinian cause. Events since Camp David made things different. Either they had to follow a low-key approach or take a concrete stand. And either policy had implications both in tangible and intangible terms.

Bangladesh as a predominantly Muslim country had historical involvement in the Middle East, more so following the political changeover of 1975. This article is an attempt to relate the major events in the Middle East since Camp David with the nature and level of Bangladesh's involvement with the Middle Eastern countries. Further, it will be seen whether the foreign policy constraints of Bangladesh underwent any change during the period under study. In view of the complex nature of the Middle East situation, some of the policy options available to Bangladesh in the eighties will also be outlined. Section I outlines the Middle East situation while Section II relates the events to Bangladesh. It is important to note that the paper will not make any causal analysis of the two sets of variables as outlined above. Rather it would be a correlational analysis.

I.

The immediate consequences of the Camp David Agreement and accompanying Peace Treaty were consolidation of Israeli position on the one hand and the undermining of concerted efforts by the Arab states to uphold the cause of Palestine on the other. In fact much of the efforts of the Arab bodies and individual states were directed against Egypt as punitive measures. Israel on the other hand could neutralise Egypt which had greater national interest at stake because of Sinai. So Israel went on with her settlement plans in the occupied territories. One estimate suggests that the number of

settlements multiplied by a factor of almost 4 as compared to settlements during Begin period before Camp David.³

The second consolidation came in the form of annexation of occupied territories in the most opportune moments. While the US, the guarantor of the peace process, was busy with election, Begin went ahead with annexation of East Jerusalem. Another opportune moment was the death of Sadat following which Israel annexed the Golan Heights which she occupied since 1967.

As a supplement to the Camp David Process EEC proposal that was envisaged to incorporate the Palestinians in the negotiation process did not gain much ground. Also the efforts of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) through the Jerusalem Committee (later upgraded to as the Jerusalem Summit Committee) faltered. The OIC approach was unilateral and could not initiate any dialogue between the conflicting parties. Secondly the OIC was simultaneously preoccupied with the Iran-Iraq war and the thrust of its action on Jerusalem got diluted. In fact the Iran-Iraq war pronounced the split in the Arab world and introduced some changes in the configuration of alignment, which, in turn, forced the PLO to take the delicate choice of staying in the 'Steadfastness' group or supporting Iraq.

Israeli direct involvement in Lebanon made the Middle East scenario all the more complicated. The

3. *Palestine* (Beirut) 1—15 April 1981

intra-Arab conflict worked so much to Israel's advantage that at one point both Syrian and Israeli forces were fighting the Palestinians. While that state of conflict was brought down to a level of "managed peace" with posting of UN Peace keeping forces in Southern Lebanon, the latest show-down on Lebanon between Israel and Syria brought the situation almost to a point of explosion.

The Israel-Syria conflict brought in its trail two important developments vis-a-vis the Camp David process. First is the role of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia announced *Jihad* against Israel following her annexation of East Jerusalem. Though the initial force of *Jihad* was diluted later, it attracted the attention of those concerned with the Middle East drama. With a dominant position in the OPEC and a traditional linkage with the US, Saudi Arabia fitted well in a US-initiated peace move in the Syria-Israel conflict. Her active interest has been further manifest in her floating a 8-point Middle East peace plan that envisages a Palestine State, implicit recognition of Israel and the involvement of Soviet Union under the UN aegies. The second development is the emergence of the PLO as a *defacto* party in the ceasefire. This in fact, helped PLO in coming out of the temporary relegation following Iran-Iraq conflict.

The most serious blow, however, was on the cause of the Palestinians. Camp David provided the only institutionalised dialogue on Palestine. But a gulf of difference occurred over what exactly the term "Palestine autonomy" meant. "For Begin, autonomy

is barely a millimeter beyond that exists now. For Sadat it is a millimeter or so short of full sovereignty" said one US analyst.⁴

Another significant input in the Middle East is the recent Islamic resurgence which worked both ways. The Islamic component of Arab nationalism served as a countervailing force to Zionist aggression and provided the Muslim countries of the Middle East a rationale for establishing a common platform. But the fundamentalist aspect of the resurgence tended to cause serious split and instability in some of the countries. While Iran was directly affected by sectarian infighting, other countries threatened with such sources of instability were Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Sheikdoms.

The death of Anwar Sadat is likely to introduce some qualitative changes in the Middle East scene. Egypt under the new President is in a transitional stage pending return of the remaining part of Sinai in April 1982. But some of Mubarak's overtures like the visit to many of the Arab states, endorsement of Arab reaction to annexation of Golan Heights and Arab hints to Egypt, indicate that Egypt may follow a less unilateral and isolated approach as it did under Sadat. But so far Arab-Israeli conflict is concerned, one is tended to believe that the issue will only be hightened in the eighties. With Sinai returned to Egypt Israel will consolidate her position elsewhere and will make no concession in any other front. "Israel will complete its withdrawal from the Sinai desert but will never allow

4, *Time*, 16 April 1979, p.36

itself to live through another such tragedy", said Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir.⁵

Much depends, however, on the involvement of Super Powers in the region. The increasing interest that the US is taking in Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and some other Middle Eastern countries in arms supplies and strategic cooperation in Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) complicates the scenario. Whether the US is motivated to deter increasing Soviet influence the region or just playing a balancing game, the fact remains that such involvements would only generate instability and intensify conflicts.

II

This section relates events in the Middle East with the level of Bangladesh's involvement in that region. To start with, it would be pertinent to outline the factors that tend to explain why events in the Middle-East are of greater concern to Bangladesh than instability in Europe or elsewhere. Firstly, Bangladesh, with its predominantly Muslim population (85 percent) identifies closely with the Islamic Umma⁶ in general, and the Middle Eastern countries in particular. In fact, the ties have been "religious, historical and cultural" as mentioned by the late President Ziaur Rahman in one of his earliest public speeches.⁷ The Arabs traditionally held a fascination for the Sub-continent and

5. See *Emirates News*, 3 January 1982

6. Means World of Islam

7. *Address at Suhrawardy Uddyan* on 1 May 1976 (Dacca: Department of Publication, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh), 1976.

vice versa. Secondly, Bangladesh's firm and unequivocal support to the Palestinian cause, in particular, and to the Arabs, in general, vis-a-vis Israel, has elevated the religious bond to political level. Even in early Bangladesh period when a lot of misgivings were there in Arab minds over the dismemberment of a fellow Muslim country, e.g. Pakistan, Bangladesh pursued her long-term interests by pointedly ignoring Israel's overtures to recognize Bangladesh and by supporting the Arabs in October 1973 War against Israel through moral encouragement and some token of help in her own humble capacity.⁸ In all the international forums that the young nation got membership of, Bangladesh consistently condemned the Israeli illegal occupation of Arab-lands and denial of inalienable fundamental right of the Palestinians. She continued such efforts, even more intensively and actively following the 1975 changeover. Such solidarity with the Arabs earned her dividend. The Middle Eastern countries found in Bangladesh a strong ally and champion of peace. She became an active member of both the 8-member Islamic Peace Mission on Iraq-Iran War and 3-member Jerusalem Committee to formulate action plan to liberate Jerusalem. Thirdly, Bangladesh and several Muslim states of the Middle-East are linked by common membership in various international forums like the United Nations, the Non-aligned Movement, the Group of 77 and more prominently, the 40--nation⁹ Organization of Islamic

8. See Al Gomhouria (Cairo) 6 April 1972

9. Other two members, Egypt and Afganistan still suspended.

Conference (OIC). In fact, it was the OIC, originally initiated for recovering Jerusalem, that has brought the Muslim world a common political fold. Since 1974, Bangladesh has been an active member of the OIC.

Apart from these areas of mutual concern, Bangladesh has considerable stake in the Middle East in terms of her national interest. Bangladesh is dependent on the Middle East for almost total of her crude oil requirement. Secondly, these Middle-Eastern oil-rich, capital-surplus countries are an important source of aid so vitally required for Bangladesh's development programmes. Table. 1 gives the relative importance of aid from Middle Eastern countries.

Table 1. Aid disbursement to Bangladesh (Dec. 1971-June 1979)

Source of Aid*	(US Million Dollar)	
	Disbursement	
USA	1971-75	379.5
	1976-79	648.1
		<u>1045.6</u>
Japan	1971-75	68.6
	1976-79	321.9
		<u>390.5</u>
Canada	1971-75	195.6
	1976-79	187.3
		<u>382.9</u>
Saudi Arabia and Other Muslim Countries in the Middle-East.	1971-75	78.9
	1976-79	213.1
		<u>292.0</u>
USSR	1971-75	113.1
	1976-79	53.4
		<u>166.5</u>
OPEC Special Fund	1971-75	—
	1976-79	19.2
		<u>19.2</u>
International Agencies, West Europe and Others.	1971-75	1325.1
	1976-79	1671.9
		<u>2997.0</u>
Grand Total:		5293.7

Source: Adapted from Govt. of Bangladesh, Ministry of Finance, External Resources Division, *Flow of External Resources into Bangladesh (as of June 30, 1979)*, Dacca: External Resources Division, Govt. of Bangladesh, November 1979, pp.8-54.

*Aid includes grant and loan elements of food aid, project aid and non-project aid.

While reading the sources and quantum of aid, it should be remembered that the Middle Eastern countries are late comers as aid donors since political relations with the region were established much later than with other major donor groups. It should also be noted that the loan components of the aid from the Middle-Eastern countries have been extended on relatively concessionary and easy terms.¹⁰

At disaggregated level, Saudi Arabia has donated US \$ 2 million for the Islamic Centre for Technical and Vocational Training and Research in Dacca which is expected to start functioning July 1983. The \$10 million OIC project will have a capacity to train 650 students from the 42 member states of the OIC.¹¹

Bangladesh has also, in the recent past, been receiving economic assistance from the Islamic Development Bank for various ongoing projects in Bangladesh. For instance, the IDB assisted in the completion of the Zia International Air port at Kurmitola, Dacca. It has also provided \$ 60 million for the promotion of Jute in Islamic countries.

The increasing primacy of the Middle East as a source of employment for Bangladesh skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manpower arose from tightening of immigration control by such traditional sources of employment as the UK the USA and West Germany on the one hand, and increasing demand of manpower for

10. See Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, External Resources Division, *Flow of External Resources into Bangladesh (as of June 1979)* opcit.

11. For details, see the *Bangladesh Times*, 18 December 1979, p.1.

industrial and infrastructure development of the Middle-East countries. Table-2 would reveal the validity of the statement. As a specific example, in January 1978, 1681 persons left Bangladesh for overseas employment and all went to the Middle-East.¹²

This flow of manpower cannot be viewed only as one-way traffic as flow of aid normally is. To quote the late President:

We are already contributing to others development process, not in terms of money, but in the shape of trained manpower.¹³

It is also interesting to note, quite contrary to the popular belief, that the skilled, semi-skilled and professional persons going from Bangladesh to the Middle-East almost equals unskilled manpower outflow as would be evident from Table-2.

Table 2: Manpower outflow from Bangladesh during 1978 and 1979

Type of Manpower	Middle-Eastern Countries		others		Total	
	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979
Unskilled	9956	9971	7	132	9963	10103
Semi skilled	8753	9105	11	74	8764	9179
Skilled and professionals	1389	369	32	30	1421	399
Miscellaneous	2647	4736	4	68	2651	4801
Total	22,745	24,181	54	308	22,799	24,486

Source : Adapted from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh 1980*. (Dacca : Ministry of planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh). pp. 488-489.

12. Government of the peoples Republic of Bangladesh, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, as cited in Iftikhar A. Chowdhury, *Bangladesh's External Relation : A Strategy of a Small Power in a Subsystem*, Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 1981
13. See *Bangladesh Times*, (Dacca) 29 December 1979,

Apart from the above reasons the Middle East is likely remain a major preoccupation with the Bangladeshi policy makers for a number of additional considerations. Bangladesh as an ardent adherent of Non-aligned Movement belongs to no bloc. But her security perceptions in the face of a very powerful neighbour with whom she has good number of outstanding bilateral problems create a vacuum in the Sub-Continental power balance. Bangladesh's connection with the Middle Eastern countries enhances Bangladesh's sense of security which she wants to bolster though diplomatic manoeveribility. Secondly, in the Middle Eastern countries, Bangladesh finds an ally who support her in her various diplomatic manoeveres, such as the bid for the UN Security Council seat in 1978.¹⁴ Secondly Islam and its recent resourgence form a significant constituency in the present democratic politics of Bangladesh.¹⁵ Finally, and most importantly, solidarity with the Islamic World forms one of the important cornerstone of our foreign policy. This gives an in-built bias for increasing involvemnt in the Middle East.

With the level of involvement of Bangladesh as seen above, we may proceed to analyse the implications developments in the Middle East. Bangladesh has been ardently championing the cause of Islamic solidarity

14, Middle Eastern support was invoked during refugee dispute with Burma and water dispute with India. See Iftikhar A. Chowdhury, *op. cit.*

15. *Ibid.*

through out the Muslim World. But historic intra-Arab differences, pronounced by Sadat's unilateral peace initiative have put constraint on the foreign policy postulates of Bangladesh, as mentioned earlier. The problems are aggravated when issues like suspension of Egypt's membership from the OIC or the Non-aligned Movement came up in the forums where Bangladesh is an active participant. Bangladesh has cordial relation with Egypt as well as other nations of the so-called rejectionist front and the moderate group. Obviously Bangladesh had to make a delicate balance of low-key and going-along the majority policy. Similar precarious position was faced when the UN General Assembly discussed and rejected the Camp David Agreement as solution to the Palestine problem.

Such low-key approach, though dictated by practical considerations, has another consequence on foreign policy practices. Though Bangladesh's support to the Palestinian cause has been firm and unequivocal, her approach appears to be sterile as she cannot take a definite stand on any specific proposal on Palestine. Incidentally mention may be made of significant qualitative changes on Palestine question. And there has involved commensurate number of alternative solutions for Palestine question. Against this, the OIC strategy of liberation of Jerusalem appears to be far-fetched and lacking realism. These changing events in the Middle East suggest that Bangladesh's foreign policy toward the Middle East be updated and tuned to the qualitative changes accompanying those.

The intra-Arab differences put another constraint in Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts on international level. While Bangladesh received support of the Arab blocs in securing her a seat in the UN Security Council, her attempt for UN Council Assembly Presidentship faced limited prospect because there were two candidates from Iraq and Syria who differed on Iran-Iraq war.

The component of Islamic resurgence since mid-seventies as seen in the overall increase in political awareness in the Arab world backed by economic power namely, increasing revenue from oil resources, has contributed positively to the national development of Bangladesh. She identified more and more with the Middle Eastern countries and it was paid-off with increased flow of aid in the past 1975 period as was evident from Table I earlier.

The OPEC, where the Middle Eastern countries are the dominant members, has created a Special Fund for those affected by the oil price-rise. Also the resurgence of Islamic-Solidarity activities have been reflected in common stand an international forum, reinforcing and strengthening the activities of the OIC. This, in turn, provided Bangladesh with increased role in such forums.

But resurgence of Islam as manifested in intra-religions feud has put Bangladesh in rather precarious position as well. Reference may be made to the Shia-Sunni conflict in Iran.

While the rising level of cooperation between Bangladesh and the Muslim countries of the Middle East has clearly increased Bangladesh's stake in the

region, the heightened Super Power and Chinese involvement in the Middle-East has complicated for Bangladesh the task of nurturing her growing relations with the Muslim countries. For instance, the issue of American hostage held in Tehran by Irani nationalist contained the potentials of straining Bangladesh's relation with the United States or Iran or both. Specially Bangladesh was then a member of the Security Council. After an initial period in which she appeared to be dragging her feet on this issue, Dacca categorically urged Iran to release the hostage and called upon Washington to delay considerations of sanctions against Iran.¹⁶

Bangladesh has also faced with a difficult situation due to Soviet interference in Afganistan (December 1979). Dacca's categorical disapproval of the Soviet action in Afganistan has in all probability, displeased Moscow.

It may, however, he argued if it is at all necessary for Bangladesh to adopt the "walking-the-tight-rope" policy aimed at maintaining friendly relations with the Muslim bloc and refraining from displeasing the Super Powers and China. A country like Bangladesh, which is much dependent on external assistance¹⁷ for development project can hardly afford to annoy some of

16. For text of statement of K.M. Kaisar, former Bangladesh Representative in the UN Security Council and subsequent Bangladesh stand on the hostage issue see *Bangladesh Observer* 8 December 1979, p.4, and *the Bangladesh Times*, 30 December 1979, p. 1.

17. Dependence an external assistanee has been 75—80% in recent years. See World Bank, *Bangladesh: Current Trends and Development Issues* (Washington: World Bank) March 1979 p.iv.

its major donors Table 2 indicates that the United States and the Western bloc are the major sources of external assistance. Also aid received by Bangladesh from the United States and the Muslim countries in the Middle East rose significantly from the earlier period to the latter. In order to keep this trend continuing in the eighties, it is imperative that Dacca retains its warm relations with both the United States and the Muslim states of the Middle East. Though Moscow's assistance to Bangladesh has decreased substantially, Dacca cannot antagonise Moscow—a Super Power in the vicinity of South Asia. The recent events in Afganistan clearly suggest that the decade of the eighties may possibly witness Soviet attempt to increase its hold in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In this context our relations with China, a major power in the vicinity of South Asia having strained relation with Moscow, appears vital to our political independence and territorial integrity.

In the decade of the eighties, Bangladeshi decision makers will have to make very difficult choices. The increased complexity of the Middle-East scene will make difficult for Bangladesh to effectively avoid antagonising the major political actors operating there.