



Alfred Friendly

Words in the Middle East Valued More Than Deeds

BEIRUT—In the Middle East, the visitor tries continually to remind himself, the word is so much more important than the deed, the portrait more real than the subject, the description more valid than the event.

It is the employment of self-deception to render life more tolerable. It may even have a survival value.

Thus, from an editorial in Tuesday's Beirut newspaper Al-Hayat: "The Arabs have done nothing in this (Arab-Israeli) conflict . . . They were neither the cause of it nor the aggressors and that is how they cannot be a party to blame in it."

Thus, from the Harvard-educated director general of the Lebanese Ministry of Information: "We cannot allow United Nations forces in areas bordering Israel. Those are our lands, and no foreign troops can be tolerated on our lands."

Thus, from a former Jordanian foreign minister: "The Feddayin raids on Israel are not aggression. They are legal and proper, because they are actions within our own country, illegally occupied by Israel."

Thus, from a wealthy and cosmopolitan Lebanese shipping tycoon: "The Jews are acting according to their long-established plan, which is all laid out in that book, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion' . . ."

AND SO ALSO, with almost unanimous voice, come the assertions from all corners that the Arab world can never live with the Zionist state and that Israel is therefore duty-bound to commit national hari-kiri (not the Jews personally, for "how could we, as Semites, be anti-Semitic?" Israel schemed to start last year's war, it is said, and is even now planning further territorial aggrandizement.

If there is to be peace, the argument goes, it is Israel that must make the concessions—having, apparently, the obligation to perform the role of loser. Moreover, the Arabs must reassemble their military forces, are

now doing so, and will shortly march on Israel and destroy it.

And so on, and on.

Do the Arabs really believe all this? If so, hope for Middle East settlement is obviously zero.

But old hands in the area supply a touch of reassurance. They declare that no one really believes the Arab world can muster enough military force for years and years to conquer Israel. They also believe there is no Arab government except Syria and perhaps Algeria that would not approve in principle trying to negotiate a political settlement.

It turns out, therefore, that while the word is so much more important than the deed in the Middle East, it is also much less important. The contradiction is not as great as it appears.

For the word can change, even into its exact opposite, more readily here and with less remembrance of its antecedents than any place else in the world.

Before last Nov. 22, for example, the word was that no Arab government would dream of discussing a possible settlement until Israel withdrew every last soldier to its pre-June 5 borders. But with the passage of the United Nations resolution, the governments made clear (although for a long while only privately) that they agreed that withdrawal was part of a package deal, contingent on resolution of other elements of the settlement.

A HIGHLY influential Lebanese, who operates backstage and insists, accordingly, on anonymity, puts it this way.

"In all their history, Arabs have never sat down to a table to negotiate a peace, either as victors or vanquished. They have never had to distinguish between what a desirable state policy should be and what are the dictates of their ideology.

"So far, in this situation, they have insisted that the

problem is solely one of right and wrong. In those terms, according to their ideology, there is not one person in the Arab world who can publicly accept the existence of Israel.

"Here is the root of the difference in the Arab attitude when the governments negotiate privately and when the leaders speak from the balcony to their people in the square below."

It is in that difference—and, no doubt, in Israel's willingness to forgo hearing some words that the Arabs cannot utter—that lie such very meager hopes as may exist for a Middle East accommodation.