

This is a profoundly disturbing fact given what is at stake for the U.S. in this critical region of the world:

- 15,000 U.S. military personnel on and off shore in Lebanon and Egypt;
- Billions of dollars of U.S. foreign aid being pumped yearly into Israel to pursue policies which successive administrations have criticized and/or condemned;
- The absolute need for the U.S. to maintain healthy and normal economic and political relations with the nations in the Middle East.

Given these factors, it seems likely that U.S. Middle East policy should be a central issue for public debate. This would seem all the more likely in the light of the dramatic, and at times, tragic setbacks that we, as a nation, have suffered in the Middle East. But it is a fact that in every national election—up until the present one—there has not been a public debate on U.S. Middle East policy. This is because of two principal reasons, which I shall outline.

People vs. "Problems"

The first reason why there has not yet been a full public debate of Middle East policy is that such discussions are primarily formed not by political realities but by perceptions. For over 60 years, American perceptions of the Middle East have been molded by only one side to the conflict.

During the greater part of this century, the Middle East conflict has been presented to the American people in a rather simplistic equation. As expressed in 1936 by the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, the Middle East was the scene of a struggle between "the forces of civilization and the forces of the desert, of destruction."

While there have been many variations on this theme, this essentially is the message that Americans have received during the past six decades of the one-sided non-debate. In this view, there is no other side; Israelis are seen as the only human beings in the Middle East.

Listen to the words of the British Lord Balfour whose infamous declaration promised Palestine to the Zionist movement. When challenged with the fact of the existence of Arabs in Palestine and also with their fears and aspirations, Lord Balfour responded:

"We do not propose to go through the form of consulting the inhabitants as to their wishes. Zionism is of far greater importance to us than the desire and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who inhabit Palestine."

In the public mind, as informed in this one-sided manner, Israelis are understood to be what, in fact, they are, that is, complex human beings with hopes and fears. They exist in the public mind as individual people who have suffered and who continue to suffer. We know them, we can see them in our mind's eye and we can identify with them.

Israelis, we have come to believe, are people who long to be secure, so they can use their creative genius to survive in peace and prosperity.

On the other hand, Arabs, and Palestinians in particular, are viewed not as people but merely as a "political problem." When they are presented at all it is in caricature or in the collective. They are Palestinian terrorists (objects of contempt) or Palestinian refugees (objects of pity). When they are bombed by Israeli jets they become Palestinian "strongholds" or Palestinian "targets" (objects of invisibility). They are, in any case, "faceless" objects.

I must tell you a story to make this point clearer. In 1981 after the Israeli bombing of the Fakhani neighborhood in Beirut, I was stunned by the manner in which the networks covered the event. There were, as a result of just one day's bombing, 383 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians known dead. On that same day, there were six Israeli casualties, one dead, five wounded.

The network coverage from Israel was vivid and deeply moving. Weeping and frightened parents were interviewed. Ambulances screamed through the night. Wounded Israelis were carried out on stretchers while police ordered onlookers to move away, to make way.