Israel and the
New Scramble for Africa

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It is now just a century since Africa, or more specifically its west coast, was the scene of a frantic race between the European powers in their search for colonies. Today Africa is once again the subject of fierce great-power competition. But, in contrast to the previous occasion, the powers that are involved are not the traditional European colonial powers, but rather the Soviet Union and the United States; the purpose of the competition is not classical colonization but the securing of bases and spheres of influence; and finally, the area involved this time is not the west coast of Africa but the eastern shores of that continent. The Soviet Union and the United States are each intent on gaining the upper hand in the Horn of Africa, in the area bounded by Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Sudan. The focal point of this contest is Ethiopia, which is beset on several fronts by armed conflict that threatens to dismember the entire country. On the north it is engaged in a fifteen-year effort to suppress the Eritrean seces-

sionist movement, which Sudan is openly supporting and in the east it is battling a Somali-aided rebel movement which threatens to tear away the Ogaden desert region and attach it to Somalia.

The present scramble for Africa illustrates well how history tends to repeat itself in different permutations.

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But its significance goes beyond this fascinating lesson. The bizarre great-power configuration which it has engendered is noteworthy, if not the implications for America's global stance generally, and for its relations with the principals in the Arab-Israeli dispute, in particular.

In order to demonstrate the bizarre aspects of this latest greatpower struggle one need only take account of the following facts: until quite recently Ethiopia was regarded as an ally of the United States. Over a period of some twenty years it had received extensive quantities of American arms and supplies and had been regularly served by numerous U.S. agencies. In contrast, Somalia was considered to be safety anchored in the communist camp by means of a friendship and cooperation treaty with the Soviet Union. Its military forces were both trained and armed by the Soviet Union. But today things appear top- turn. Washington announced last year that it was suspending arms deliveries to Addis Ababa because of the "repressive radical nature" of the new regime. Moscow moved in quickly to fill the gap and was apparently unconcerned with the implications this might have for its ties with Somalia.

Ethiopia has expelled all American personnel and has accepted Russian advisers in their place—and these advisers are required to be the very same ones that were previously stationed in.
Somalia, Ethiopia's arch foe. And now the United States has made a 180-degree turn and has announced that it is prepared to sell arms to Somalia and Chad (not to mention Egypt). Thus today Ethiopia fights Eritrean and Tigrean rebels with American arms and Russian advisers, while Somalia and Sudan support the rebels with Russian arms and, at least, American encouragement, if not actual support. It is as if the powers were intent on playing out a game of musical chairs in East Africa.

This situation prompts several questions. First, there is the issue of timing. What factor has prompted great-power competition in the Horn of Africa precisely at this juncture? What do the powers respectively expect to gain? What prompted the powers to switch sides? And finally, how does Israel fit into this kaleidoscope of competing interests and relations? What are we to make of the repeated reports that Israel is aiding Ethiopia in its struggle against the Eritrean rebels and Somalia? No one has established the veracity of these reports (which have been vigorously denied in Jerusalem and Addis Ababa), but it is not strange that Israel's name might be coupled with that of the Soviet Union in supposed support of the Ethiopian government! What could Israel be expected to derive from such a step, and would it not be more natural to expect Israel to stand aloof from a botched of African conflict and controversy? Why should there even be a suspicion that Israel has an interest in aligning itself with Ethiopia (and the Soviet Union) in defeating rebels indirectly supported by America?

In seeking an explanation for the enigmatic constellation of forces in the Horn of Africa attention might be appropriately focused on a series of Arab summit meetings earlier this year devoted to the subject of the "security" of the Red Sea area. The first such meeting was held in February in Khartoum where Sudan's Numeiry was joined by Egypt's Sadat and Syria's Assad. The following month a twoly summit meeting was held in North Yemen attended by the heads of state of North and South Yemen, Somalia and Sudan, all of which border one side of the Red Sea. The pronouncements with which issues from these two meetings on Red Sea "security" proclaimed, in effect, that beforehand the Red Sea was to be regarded as an "exclusive Arab lake." The choice of timing for this imperial Arab "edit" seems to have been influenced by an announcement regarding the future of French Somaliland or Djibouti. On January 1, 1977, French President Giscard D'Estaing revealed that France would soon take steps that would lead to its vacating this last French colony on the African continent. The emergence of an independent state of Djibouti, with membership in the Arab League assured, would mean that both the African and Asian sides of the Bab El Mandeb straits, the gateway of the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean, would be under exclusive Arab control. The Red Sea at both its northern and southern extremities would, in effect, be under Arab lock and key. The proclamation of an "Arab lake" was designed to exploit both the economic and strategic implications of this new state of affairs. For an area as rich in oil prospects as the Red Sea, where offshore wells are already in operation, it was, no doubt, considered "expedient" to delineate the states entitled to assert mineral rights in the area. But the strategic implications were even more momentous and of more immediate consequence. Internal waters are, of course, subject to entirely

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different regimes from those of inter-
national waterways, in particular with
regard to the passage of warships. The
only two non-Arab littoral states with
port facilities opening onto the Red
Sea are Israel and Ethiopia and these,
in Arab eyes, did not count. The Arab
attitude toward Israeli need not be
elaborated upon, despite Egypt's com-
mitment, under the 1974 disengage-
ment agreement, to desist from "mil-
itary blockade" against Israel and to
permit transit through the Suez Canal
of non-military cargoes destined for or
coming from Israel. But even with re-
gard to the Arab leaders, they were not
prone to accord her claims much
weight, if any. Ethiopia has two
ports on the Red Sea, Assab and Mas-
sawa, but these service only 20 percent
of Ethiopia's cargo trade. The reason
for this is both their remoteness and the
fact that they are located in Eritrea and
thus subject to serious disruption as a
result of the fighting raging in that area.
Moreover, since Sudan and other Arab
states are actively supporting the Eri-
trean secessionists, Ethiopia's claim to
a littoral status on the Red Sea could be
more readily dismissed by the Arabs.
The bulk of Ethiopia's trade, some 80
percent of it, has been channeled
through Djibouti and this, as noted,
was about to become an inde-
pendent state associated with the Arab
League.

These events form a convenient
backdrop for appreciating the possible
motives of the Soviet Union in com-
mitting itself to the Ethiopian cause.
Many have commented upon the
strangeness of Soviet conduct in chang-
ing horses in midstream, in jettison-
ing its secure base in Somalia for
what appears to be a highly vulnera-
ble and precarious Ethiopian enter-
prise. A possible clue to Soviet inten-
tions may, however, be found in state-
ments made during the May visit, of
Ethiopian leader, Colonel Mengistu
Haile Mariam, to Moscow. Soviet Pres-
ident Podgorny utilized that occa-
sion to present a major pronouncement
on the subject of the Red Sea and free-
dom of navigation, "access for all," as
he said, "indicate that the imperialists
are using some Arab countries, first of
all Saudi Arabia, in an attempt to ex-
ercise control over the traffic of oil
passing from the Persian Gulf via the
Red Sea into the Mediterranean. Fur-
thermore, it serves as a major staging
base for countering Western naval
power in the Indian Ocean. But, as
important as these considerations may
be for Soviet naval strategy, they obvi-
ously do not equal the positive need to
ensure unimpeded access for ships of
the Soviet Union's own ships from the
Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean.
This goal, it is submitted, constitutes
the touchstone of Soviet naval strategy.

As early as 1971, Alastair Buchan,
director of the British Institute for
Strategic Studies, noted Russia's growing
concentration of power in the Mediterraneo.
He linked it to "the desire or need for Suez to
influence more broadly strategic objectives that in-
clude the containment of China in Asia and Africa." In recent years Mos-
cow has shifted decisively from a de-
fensive to an offensive naval strategy,
a fact attested to by the number, di-

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versification and, above all, modernization of Soviet ships. By this shift Moscow has clearly indicated that it would no longer content itself with a measure of security in relation to the gateway nearest home, namely the Dardanelles. It now wished to control, or at least exercise influence over, the access gates to the world's oceans as a whole, including the Indian Ocean. Above all, the Soviet Union seeks to ensure that transit routes, such as straits and canals which link the Mediterranean to the open sea, not fall into hands which may threaten Soviet interests. This guide to Soviet policy helps explain why the Kremlin threatened to intervene in the Middle East conflicts of 1956 and 1978, but not in the 1967 War. They felt need for action arose only when both banks of the Suez Canal were on the verge of falling into hands which, in Soviet eyes, could not be regarded as any thing but hostile—namely, that of the British and French in 1956 and Israel in 1978.

Given the present state of hostility between Cairo and Moscow, not to speak of the long-standing antagonism between Riyadh and Moscow, the Soviet Union could hardly look with equanimity on the prospect of the Red Sea becoming an Arab lake. To allow Saudi Arabia (alias the United States) to extend its hegemony over this vital international waterway would be equivalent to admitting defeat for Soviet naval strategy at a critical point. The uirest means to our such a development is to promote the cause of non-Arab littoral states. Israel, although it might be a logical candidate for such Soviet promotion, does not fit into the Soviet scheme of things, for other reasons. Thus Ethiopia has come to fulfill a pivotal role in Soviet tactics. If Moscow can pour in sufficient help to enable Addis Ababa to gain the upper hand in its struggles with its neighbors (as late as the hour may be) it may hope that ultimately Djibouti may also come under its three-pian control. This would provide Moscow with an extraordinarily rich prize. It would allow the Russians to neutralize any Saudi Arabian threat over the Red Sea and the Red Sea and would also provide a convenient new over Egyptian use and domination of the Red Sea and

America's policy is, of course, directed at countering and thwarting this Soviet threat to gain a foothold in, and ultimately control the Horn of Africa. In this regional contest Washington's interests coincide neatly with Saudi Arabia's traditional anti-communist stance and with Egypt's more recent antagonism toward the Soviet Union. Washington apparently leans heavily on these countries to bring their influence to bear in the Arab world to shut out the Russians from the area. For its part the U.S. administration has announced that it is prepared to sell arms (paid for presumably by Saudi Arabia) to three Arab states which had previously relied exclusively on Moscow for supplies, namely Somalia, Sudan and Chad. Washington is intent on shore up the states bordering on the Red Sea and is not averse to seeing it converted into something like an "anti-communist Arab lake."

For Israel, the latest American moves in providing arms and support to Arab states, ostensibly engaged in combating Russian penetration and domination of the area, has serious implications. In effect, the Arab states surrounding the Red Sea, under the economic inspiration of Saudi Arabia and the political influence of Egypt, are being welded into a pro-American and anti-Russian force in the great

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power contest that is being waged on the African continent. Israel cannot expect that its relations with the United States will remain unaffected by this development. It is not merely a question of arms, in the sense that the supply of American weapons to a coterie of Arab countries cannot but affect drastically the balance of power in the Middle East. It means far more than that. A Cairo-Riyadh axis allied with the United States in a U.S.-Soviet contest means, in effect, that in an Arab-Israeli contest the United States is at best neutralized. The rivalry between the great powers over the Horn of Africa presents but an additional opportunity for Sadat to prove his cold war credentials in de facto alliance with Washington. It dovetails in neatly with Sadat’s earlier escape in initiating a clash with Libya’s Qaddafi which served to demonstrate Egypt’s vulnerability to Soviet-inspired “aggression.” But now Sadat is going one better. He is not merely a victim of Communist “action” and thus entitled to American help, he is a foremost ally in a joint enterprise of forestalling Soviet penetration and domination of the African continent. He is attempting to establish an overriding identity of interest between Cairo and Washington. And from its own experience Israel can readily appreciate that it is a convergence of interests rather than the existence of a formal treaty which determines the conduct and responses of states. After all, the United States rallied to Israel’s support in 1973 despite the absence of a formal alliance between the two states, whereas despite the existence of a U.S.-Pakistan Defense Treaty, the United States had stayed its hand in the 1971 Indian-Pakistani conflict over Bangla Desh. Israel should recognize Egypt’s move in the Horn of Africa for what it essentially is—the latest step in an overall design to replace Israel as America’s ally in the global competition with the Soviet Union, at least in so far as the Middle East and Africa are concerned. It represents a skillful attempt to neutralize Washington in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Sadat wishes to drive home the lesson that the strategic needs of the United States, no less than its economic/energy requirements, necessitate concerted action with the Arab states.

Those intent on keeping America’s Middle East policy on an even keel cannot but be concerned over the shortsightedness of this attempt to promote a Washington-Cairo-Riyadh axis. American acquiescence, albeit through silence, to the creation of an Arab “regime” for the Red Sea would seem to be the height of folly. It constitutes an inexplicable and unwarranted departure from the traditional U.S. stance on freedom of the seas. The United States has regularly championed the right of innocent passage of ships and has steadfastly opposed any moves which would tend to thwart or limit that right. The Red Sea, as part of the open seas, has always been subject to this right and, in addition, the main approach to that sea—the Suez Canal—is governed by a regime deriving from the 1888 Constantinople Convention, which assured freedom of navigation to the ships of all states. It would make little sense to ensure free passage through the gate only to bar passage to the sea beyond. Furthermore, at a time when the United States is attempting to order future arrangements which will ensure the safety and security of its ships traversing the Panama Canal it would appear inconsistent to commit a recognized and established international waterway to the control of a limited number of littoral states. In

the Middle East, their significance. All have recommended the right of the Arab states to the Red Sea. International law, whether the Seebas or another route, dictates that the United States act to ensure the freedom of the seas.

Apart from criticism of power seekers, the American press has focused on the so-called “red lines” which the United States is said to bring radical changes to its position in Arab states in the Middle East. In Washington, Arab and Israeli analysts differ on the proper line of action for Arab states. A

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the Middle East context, freedom of navigation carries with it special significance. At least two were in this area have resulted from interference with the right of innocent passage. American abandonment of this right with regard to the Red Sea, instead of promoting international peace and security would be more likely to set the stage for yet another round of fighting. In this connection it is appropriate to recall that the September, 1975, interim agreement included a clause in the U.S.-Israeli Assurance to the following effect:

14. In accordance with the principle of freedom of navigation on the high seas and free and unimpeded passage through and over straits connecting international waters, the United States government regards the Straits of Bab el-Mandeb and the Straits of Gibraltar as international waterways. It will support Israel's right to free and unimpeded passage through such straits. Similarly, the United States government recognizes Israel's right to freedom of flights over the Red Sea and such straits and will support diplomatically the exercise of that right.

Apart from these general considerations of principle, American policymakers would be wise not to lose sight of the volatile nature of Arab affairs, which may at any moment erupt and bring radical governments into power in Arab states currently aligned with Washington, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. One need not dwell at length on the repercussions of such a development for American interests in the Middle East. American support for the expansionist designs of Arab states would backfire seriously if anti-American governments were to come into power in these countries. Geography and oil would thus interact to make the United States even more vulnerable than it already is to Arab manipulation and blackmail.

Moreover, any American sponsored Arab combination which would tend to undermine Israel's security could in like measure pose a threat to America's long-range Middle East interests. After all, it is now well recognized that Israel (ironically enough) twice in the course of the past decade preserved the independence of Arab states aligned with the United States. The first time was, of course, in the Six Day War, when Israel's action in defense of its own security shattered Nasser's plan for a pan-Arab empire extending as far north as Iraq and as far west as Morocco. The second occasion was in 1971, when Syria was deterred from launching a full-scale invasion of Jordan by the threat of Israeli intervention. (One might also mention that Lebanon's independence, even today, is very much in doubt to Israeli's existence.) In each case Israel effectively altered the extension of a Soviet sphere of influence in the Middle East. These considerations might, with justice, chagre American zeal for an arrangement or de facto alliance which, at the surface, may bear a momentary anti-communist stamp but which, in the long run, would threaten Israel's security and hence America's own vital interests in the Middle East.