

GERMANY'S MID-EAST POLICY

Karl Kaiser and Udo Steinbach, eds. *Deutsch-arabische Beziehungen*. Munich and Vienna: R. Oldenburg Verlag, 1981. 364 pp.

Reviewed by Kenneth M. Lewan*

This book, which contains numerous contributions by various authors, has two main themes: the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the Middle East conflict, and German-Arab economic relations. I shall restrict my comments to the treatment of the first theme and, in particular, to the role of the FRG with regard to a settlement of the conflict.

This question was dealt with almost exclusively by the two editors, Karl Kaiser, Director of the Research Institute of the German Society for Foreign Politics, and Udo Steinbach, Director of the German Orient Institute. In the

* Kenneth M. Lewan teaches Politics at the University of Munich.

closing chapter of the book they write with approval of West Germany's efforts since the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty "to sustain the dynamic of the peace process and achieve a complete peace." They refer to three aspects of these efforts which they emphasize: (1) the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty has furthered the prospects of peace in the Middle East; therefore, the FRG must take political and economic steps to prevent the breakdown of the treaty through Egypt's "internal weakness." (2) On the other hand, the Arab "rejection front" is right in arguing that Israel's withdrawal from all of the occupied territories and its recognition of the right of the Palestinians to self-determination are necessary for permanent peace in the Middle East; the European Community should mediate as an "honest broker" between these states and Egypt. (3) The FRG should do nothing that would weaken Israel: "Only a strong Israel that does not feel itself abandoned by friends" would be willing to compromise.

In another passage, the authors assert that Western Europe has a "weak negotiating position" with regard to the Middle East conflict. It "possesses far fewer effective political and military instruments than the US." Moreover, the members of the European Community have different interests, so their common stands have to be the result of compromise. In still another passage, however, the authors remark that European initiatives and political engagements are necessary.

When one scrutinizes the efforts of the FRG (and those of the authors too), it becomes clear that they are like an automobile driver who steps on the gas while the car is in neutral gear, producing a lot of noise and no movement — a waste of energy which was financially supported (in the case of the authors) by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Concerning the first point: how would supporting the Egyptian-Israeli treaty contribute to peace in the sense of the European resolutions? In another chapter of the book, "The Arab States and the Conflict with Israel," Steinbach expresses the expectation that because of the treaty Israel will significantly change "its traditional estimate of the value of certain territories for the security of the country." Furthermore, "the necessity of treating the future of the Palestinians as a distinct problem has been explicitly recognized and procedural provisions for it are part of the treaty, so there are grounds for the assumption that the negotiating process itself will lead to re-thinking."

But the fact is that Zionist colonization and the other measures which are aimed at annexing the territories occupied in 1967 have continued with increasing speed since the treaty was signed in March 1979. Furthermore, the provisions concerning the future of the Palestinians are nothing more than a promise to negotiate about "self-rule." The treaty mentions only the "legitimate rights of the Palestinians" and autonomy on the West Bank and

in the Gaza Strip. The Begin Plan, which was already made known in 1977, excluded any appreciable decision-making power of the Palestinians and was obviously aimed at annexation. In another contribution to the book (Koszinowski, "The Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli Conflict"), the situation is more realistically described: "Egypt's departure from the Arab front against Israel signifies a dangerous weakening of the Arab side, especially in military affairs. Israel has no reason to be concerned about an Arab attack, since the Arab front, without Egypt, is too weak. Without military pressure the Arab states are in a worse position than they had been to force Israel out of the territories occupied in 1967."

Steinbach's assertion about Israel's "traditional estimate of the value of certain territories for the security of the country" suggests that Israel conquered and held onto Arab territory only for the purpose of security. He makes this claim several times: "After the 1948 War Israel set itself the task of defending the *status quo*." The armistice "was repeatedly broken by Arab guerrilla actions against Israel's settlements and Israeli reprisals." "The tension on the Egyptian-Israeli border escalated since 1955 because of armed attacks on Israel's border settlements." The Arabs did not want to accept the *status quo* which "in their eyes was the result of an injustice." Their emotions were constantly aroused "simply because of the mere existence of Israel." Steinbach ignores the abundance of evidence which indicates that the Zionists intended to conquer all of Palestine, for example, the diaries of Moshe Sharett, the frank statements by Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders, and the reports of the United Nations Armistice Commission. He also fails to mention the efforts of the Arab states to prevent infiltration by individual Palestinians until the Israeli attack on Gaza in 1955.

With regard to the 1967 War, Steinbach writes:

Nasser did not plan a war of annihilation. On the other hand he was convinced after the defeat in 1956 that he would be in a position to rehabilitate Arab arms. The fact is that a chain of circumstances developed: a clear escalation – including threats of war from the Arab side – strong pressure from the public (presumably from the Egyptian army too), verbal radicalism by Nasser himself, aggressive Arab acts such as the blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba, but, no doubt, also overreaction on Israel's part, as well as misunderstandings on both sides, concerning the intentions of the other, and, finally, inadequate international attempts at mediation.

Of course, this account of the outbreak of the war is incredible in the light of such well-established facts as the following: four members of the Israeli General Staff have admitted that they knew Nasser did not intend to attack Israel. Nasser stated three times that he would fight, but he added the condition that the Israelis must attack first. Israel rejected a proposed compromise on passage through the Straits of Tiran which would have enabled Israel to obtain oil and other important supplies by means of foreign ships, as it had in the past. Israel insisted, instead, on passage for Israeli ships

which had carried an insignificant part of Israeli shipments. Before the UN Secretary-General U Thant agreed to withdraw UN troops from Egyptian territory, he offered them to Israel, but the offer was rejected. The characterization of the Israeli attack as overreacting is a mild censure, considering the napalm attacks against civilians, the loss of thousands of human lives and so forth.

As concerns the second point of the authors: what is the connection between a role for the FRG as an honest broker between Egypt and the "Rejection Front," and a solution in line with the resolutions of the European Community? At one point the authors remark that the US is blocked "internally" from taking measures which would lead to such a settlement. "Precisely in this situation the clarifications and demands of the Europeans are suitable for maintaining a credible role for the West as a legitimate mediator, sustaining the interest of the Arabs in a negotiated settlement and avoiding a complete breach between Egypt and the other Arab camp."

The purpose of the mediation which the authors have in mind is not to strengthen the Arab camp so that it could put Israel under military or other pressure. The "breach" which they want to avoid could bring about a new Egyptian government and such pressure on Israel. Since they do not entertain hopes that the US will act and they cannot reasonably expect any change in Israel, the role of the FRG as an honest broker appears to be a delaying tactic, unless they advocate European measures calculated to set the United States and Israel in motion.

As for the authors' third point: is it true that only a strong Israel would be willing to make concessions? Is the ability of the European Community to bring about a change in the Middle East conflict as limited as the authors claim?

It is notable that Steinbach should assert in his separate contribution that the securing of peace and Western interests in the Middle East can only be achieved if the US puts pressure on Israel. That implies that Israel has to be brought down from its position of strength before it will engage in genuine negotiations. This assumption certainly is more realistic. It is confirmed by the withdrawal of Israeli troops after the Suez War under the threat of American sanctions.

Apparently the authors have not thought about possible measures that could be taken by Europe. One which deserves serious consideration is the suspension of the FRG's "development aid," which amounts to at least 160 million German marks a year and makes up a part of the funds with which Israel colonizes the occupied territories. Because the FRG wants to ease up tensions with the Soviet Union in Europe, it should also be interested in bringing the United States and the Soviet Union to the

bargaining table to negotiate the Palestine question.

Instead of presenting a thoughtful contribution on ways of overcoming the unjust and dangerous American and Israeli practices and achieving the solution which the FRG purports to want, Kaiser and Steinbach furnish the FRG's politics of inaction with a fig leaf of pretended helplessness.