

## Peace Operations in the Middle East: Warnings from the Past

By Sean M. Maloney, PhD

Since the escalation in Palestinian-Israeli violence in recent weeks, a number of suggestions for an international peace observation force have circulated in the media. In 1954, Canadian General E.L.M. ‘Tommy’ Burns took command of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) at its headquarters in the divided city of Jerusalem. For the next two years, Burns and his international peace observation force attempted to implement a ceasefire agreement. In 1962, Burns wrote Between Arab and Israeli, a work detailing his experiences in UNTSO. Out of print for forty years, I was asked to lend my battered copy to General Romeo Dallaire while he was in the process of writing his memoirs. He exclaimed to his co-author: “All I have to do is exchange the dates, names and places: The problems Burns encountered with the UN and the belligerents were the same as mine!”

What can we learn from Burns’ experiences in the Middle East? In Burns view, there were four problems: The Palestinian refugee flow out of Israeli-occupied territory in the wake of the 1948 war and the disposition of property left behind; the boundaries between Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; and the status of Jerusalem. All remain operative today. In his attempts to implement the armistice agreements, he learned that minor incidents could have decisive effects in the propaganda war, media commentators, and in diplomatic forums. Propaganda, a significant contributor to the problems, was “a mode of inducing a desired frame of mind in those who listened to it” which sustained an escalating revenge cycle that could only be broken if both sides want to stop it.

In dealing with this situation, UNTSO observers were “policemen without truncheons” which had no means to enforce the peace. They were, therefore,

“watchmen for the UN” so that diplomats could use the information to pressure both sides. The UN diplomats did not always understand the force’s function and unrealistic expectations resulted. UNTSO became the scapegoat for diplomatic failure and, more importantly, any activity conducted by the belligerents that the observers could not ‘control.’

UNTSO’s mandate in the 1950s fluctuated with the complexity of the Middle East environment. This made the mission more and more opaque which increased expectations as to what it was supposed to do, operations which the organization was not structured or equipped to carry out. UN observers were not the answer. There was increased escalation which, over time, ensured that UNTSO needed to be reinforced with peacekeeping troops in 1956. This was in part brought on by media pressure to ‘do something’ and thus parallels the situation with the Kosovo Verification Mission and KFOR in 1999, or the EC Monitor Mission and the UN Protection Force in Bosnia in 1992.

The belligerent forces in the Middle East soon learned that the peace forces could be used to screen regrouping and rearming efforts before initiating the next round of fighting. The 1956 and 1967 wars are cases in point. As Burns soon discovered, “small raids, retaliations, reprisals, and trans-border crime [produced a state where] it is difficult in any situation of international tension, to determine which country is the aggressor- a difficulty sometimes ignored in theoretical discussions of how the world’s peace should be kept.”

Ominously, Burns warned that a preponderance of military power on one side produced arrogance and intransigence in dealings with the peace observation force. UNTSO was frequently confronted with a situation in which “both sides were only too ready to charge partiality or prejudice against the senior personnel of UNTSO when an adverse decision was given, especially when much blood had been spilled and emotions were aroused.” A consequence of this was that the belligerents viewed the UN observers as agitators and spies: Propaganda was manufactured which exaggerated

incidents involving UN personnel in order to portray their mediation efforts in the worst possible light.

In his dealings with the Israelis, Burns “felt hostility against UNTSO, always latent, and that cooperation from the Israelis only came when it suited their propaganda purposes.” As for the Arabs, they “had anti-colonial complexes...they were very quick to resent fancied slights to their new independent status by Western observers which they believed were pro-Israeli” because most settlers came from European countries.

The comparisons between Burns’ Between Arab and Israeli and General Lewis Mackenzie’s memoir Peacekeeper are obvious: Canadian peacekeeping commanders will be accused of all sorts of indiscretions merely because they are impartial. Consequently, they will be vilified by those who achieve the moral high ground in the media war to portray their ethnicity or cause as just and right. Tommy Burns was quite correct: “Usually in the Middle East the more or less plausible reason given publicly for doing or not doing anything tended to be different from the real reason.” For those advocating a new peace force for the region, beware: things have not changed.