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AN ADMIRABLE ALLY OF THE ARABS

THAT the US administration is not an "honest broker" in the dispute between Israel and the Arabs has been made manifest once more in the pressures exerted by Washington to get Israel to accept Palestinian Arabs living abroad as negotiating partners. In order to emphasize his determination, Secretary of State James Baker, cocking a snook at Israel, immediately suited action to the word. He simply invited three such Arabs to participate in one of the committees in the framework of the international conference for peace in the Middle East.

Tactically, the invitation is a new slice in the salami process evolved by the State Department for getting Israel to swallow dangerous, even outrageous proposals one by one. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir has denounced the present ploy as "a violation of the basic understanding reached at the outset that all the parties involved must approve the participants." Mr. Baker, knowing of course that Israel is absolutely, unequivocally opposed to his purpose, unblushingly told a delegation from the World Jewish Congress that, definitely and cross-my-heart, the invitation did not signify American support for the Arab demand for "the right of return" - the right of the Arab "refugees" of 1948 to be restored to their homes in Jaffa, Haifa, Acre, Jerusalem, et al. This is transparent dissimulation.

It is a confidence trick designed to carry the administration across the "red line" which it has observed generally for some time in its blueprint for Israel's reduction. Successive Israeli governments have found it desirable to shut their eyes to repeated ploys by Washington to demonstrate its belief that Israel must withdraw approximately to the Armistice Lines of 1949 - that is, to surrender Judea, Samaria and Gaza, the Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem. This purpose is identical (or nearly identical) with the unbending Arab demand for the first phase of the projected step-by-step destruction of Israel.

The US administration has, in fact, for some time embraced the Arabs' interpretation of Security Council Resolution 242 - the interpretation which they themselves combated and defeated at the Security Council. There it was finally laid down specifically, at the end of a long debate, that Israel should withdraw from "territories," and not from the territories captured in the Six Day War. The very principle underlying Resolution 242, however, was in any interpretation, a gross abuse of logic and of semblance of equity.

The launching of the Six Day War was an unvarnished - indeed highly publicized - act of Arab aggression. So certain was President Abdel Gamal Nasser of victory that he didn't even try to conceal the fact that what he was about to start was war, designed to eliminate Israel. He promised it specifically to exulting Arab crowds in the days preceding the war.

At the end of the day, it was discovered that Israel was not lying dead on the battlefield, but had won the war, had reached the Jordan and the Suez Canal, taken the Golan Heights and restored Jerusalem. The question that then arose in the international arena was: how Israel could be adequately punished. The scramble then began to find the formula for Israeli withdrawal.

Hence Resolution 242. The territorial consequences of the Six Day War forced a change in strategic thinking on the Arabs. Before 1967, it had been assumed that the elimination of Israel could be achieved in one phase: military defeat in its tiny - and vulnerable - territory, to be followed by the return of a mass of "refugees" who would complete the job.

Indeed, even before the Six Day War, Nasser, urging international pressure for the return of refugees, declared that that return would explode the "Zionist entity" from within. By the new strategy after 1967, Israel would first have to withdraw to the 1949 Armistice Lines. Only then could the final battle take place.

Consequently, while the Arabs have never failed to include the climactic "right of return" in their program, they have kept the demand in the background. Now Mr Baker has brought it onto the center of the stage. He should surely know the implications of his policy.

If he has examined all the files in his office, let us assume that he has found that State Department experts have asserted in the past that an Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 Armistice Lines, even though described by Abba Eban as a "death trap," need not lead to the annihilation of Israel. Maybe he has found reports that add up to an assessment that, given Israel's excellent armory, its people's indomitable spirit and - with all due regret - a readiness to accept a large number of casualties, Israel could survive. Without such a cheerful assessment in the State Department file, how can we explain charitably the US administration's acceptance of the prospect of the war that would follow Israeli withdrawal into the "death trap?" Now, however - through his spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler, who quoted the UN resolution of November 1948 - Mr Baker has announced identification with Phase Two of the Arabs' strategic plan; this would bring about the flooding of an attenuated Israel with returning refugees - the weapon for clinching Israel's demise.

Of course nothing of the sort is going to happen, and it is fatuous for the Israeli government to send its Washington ambassador to seek "clarification" at the State Department. What is there to clarify? The Arabs do not need American clarification. Already today, media throughout their 22 states are justifiably trumpeting the good tidings that the Americans agree on the "return" of the refugees to Jaffa and Haifa and Acre, etc.

And all the Palestinian Arabs participating at the discussions in Ottawa on the subject of refugees have been tremendously encouraged by Baker's well-timed gift. But whatever the repercussions of Baker's latest step, its immediately important lesson is that even the most myopic of Israeli leaders should recognize what is in the administration's mind and what it signifies. Is it possible that even now, our government is not prepared to abandon its grotesque notion that the administration is an "honest broker"? In order that our people should not be further misled it must be made plain that the Bush-Baker administration has placed itself firmly on the side of the Arabs.