

November 6, 1981

Cards On the Table

Five years ago, in July 1976, Norman Podhoretz, editor of the American monthly *Commentary*, wrote an article entitled “The Abandonment of Israel”. It was one of the most perceptive analyses of the decade. He wrote:

“Given the intransigent determination of the Arabs to do away with a sovereign Jewish state in their midst, and given their belated discovery that the oil weapon is so potent an instrument for accomplishing this purpose, why would they stop using it after the first victory (the return of Israel to the 1967 boundaries) or even the second (the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank) were won? With Israel reduced and weakened, the way would be open for a military *coup de grace*.

“Even if Israel’s existence were guaranteed by the United States or some combination of countries, the Arabs would have no great cause for concern. After all, if the United States and the other Western nations are so afraid of an oil embargo now, and so reluctant to use force against the threat or even the actuality of one, why would they be any the less fearful then?

“The logic is as inexorable as it is terrible: a Middle East policy based on oil is a policy based on the eventual abandonment of Israel”.

Last week, a formidable step forward towards fulfilment of Podhoretz’s vision was taken by the US Senate.

The administration’s victory in the Senate for the AWACs and “enhanced” F-15s deal with Saudi Arabia was accompanied by a chorus of avowals from President Reagan and other spokesmen, of undiminished fidelity to the US obligation to ensure Israel’s security. These declarations underline a phenomenon not envisaged in Podhoretz’s essay: how each step in Washington’s undermining of Israel’s security would be accompanied by solemn and unblinking protestations of concern for her security.

The sheer physical danger posed to Israel by the combination of AWACS and “improved” F-15 planes was described over and over again during the long public debate. The capacity of the AWACS to follow the movement of every plane and helicopter in Israel will deprive Israel, at a single stroke, of the capacity for surprise, a vital element in that qualitative superiority — so often and so solemnly “guaranteed” by Washington.

The information so gathered by the Saudis will indubitably be passed on to her Arab allies. This activity will naturally be pursued in “peacetime” — that is, during Arab preparations for the next onslaught on Israel.

The AWACS could continue to operate in wartime, too, with relative impunity. To this end they could (as has been pointed out by an ex-chief of Israeli Air Intelligence), be sent out to international waters on civilian air routes opposite Israel’s shores.

The AWACS, moreover, are not merely a magic radar instrument. They are equipped to coordinate action by battle aircraft. For example, the F-15 planes will be able to select their targets in Israel by guidance from the all-seeing AWACS. That is one reason why General George Keegan, the former chief of US Air Intelligence, testified to a Senate committee that Israel would not be able to stand up to the combination.

There is no antidote to the AWACS; and the assurances of administration spokesmen that they would continue to ensure qualitative superiority for Israel's arms is as hollow as the many other ludicrous and reckless statements made by those spokesmen in their struggle to win the battle in the Senate.

The US Administration has given a tremendous boost to the Arab dream of removing Israel from the map of the Arab world. Are the American policy-makers really unmoved by the threat projected for the elimination of the Jewish state? The answer is not unequivocal. A study of State Department attitudes to Zionism before 1948 and to the State of Israel reveals that there have always been elements in the US Administration which could not care less.

Their influence has not been decisive. Yet a scrutiny of the speedy development of the now sharp features of the Reagan Administration's policies leads to the inescapable conclusion that their thrust is similar to Washington's policy towards the nascent Israel in 1948. If it had then achieved its purpose (by way of the arms embargo) Israel would not have come into existence.

In today's specific circumstances that policy can be summarized thus: when the Israelis see the "hopelessness" of resistance to Arab demands backed by overwhelming superiority (now also qualitative) in arms, and backed by a formidable looking array of international pressure, not excluding American "advice," their leaders will be wise enough to give up and try to get the best terms they can from the Arabs.

A bitter foretaste of the role the Reagan Administration is prepared to play in "persuading" Israel was provided by the recent sanction of withholding F-15 planes (paid for twice over by Israel) and F-16 planes — in order to enforce a Saudi demand that Israel stop destroying the infrastructure of the PLO in Lebanon.

Now this policy has been lit up vividly by another dramatic and obviously carefully timed development. The ink had hardly dried on the Senate's approval of the deal with Saudi Arabia when there was a sudden orchestrated outburst of praise from administration spokesmen for the Saudis' eight point "peace plan". The plan has been unequivocally denounced by the Israel Government for what it was: a prescription for the destruction of Israel.

Why did Reagan choose that moment for this new betrayal of trust — thus publicly twisting the knife in the new wound inflicted on Israel by the AWACS deal? There was surely an overriding reason for such harsh behaviour. There was indeed.

Almost simultaneously with words of Washington's praise for the Saudi "plan" came the news that the West European states — with the exception of Greece — had decided to participate in manning the multi-national force in Sinai, a decision they had previously declined to take.

Here then was manifestly an exercise in reciprocity between the US and the Europeans. The Europeans, who had been falling over each other to express degrees of praise for the Saudi plan, now agreed to come to the aid of the Americans over Sinai in return for immediate US announcement of a positive attitude to the Saudi plan.

But the multi-national force in Sinai has been anathematized by Saudi Arabia and the other “rejectionist” Arab states because it is an outcrop of the Camp David agreement and the “peace treaty”. The Europeans have consequently some explaining to do to their oil and petrodollar masters.

Hence the journey of Lord Carrington to Riyadh to beg Saudi approval. (Formal announcement of the Europeans’ decision was unblushingly postponed until Carrington’s return).

There can be no doubt about the main arguments he is putting forward in Riyadh. First, failure to establish the multinational force would be adequate grounds for Israel not to complete its withdrawal from Sinai.

Second, US praise for the Saudi plan represents a most significant step towards Washington’s collaboration with Europe in “amending” the Camp David agreement in the spirit of the Saudi plan — and towards the bright prospect of a united international front for the subjugation of Israel.

Thus, even before Israel’s final abandonment of Sinai, the groundwork is hastily — and openly — being laid for the coalition of forces for the next step in the Arab campaign — the squeeze on Israel to return to the 1949 lines and the establishment of Arab rule in Judea (including East Jerusalem), Samaria and Gaza — the prelude to the final solution.

Israel should be thankful that the cards have thus early been laid on the table — clearly visible, moreover, to an American public opinion in which, at this moment, there is widespread suspicion and hostility towards the administration’s reckless dealings with Saudi Arabia.

These dealings have altered, transparently and dramatically, the circumstances of Israel’s basic security. They project, now for all to see, a state of unacceptable weakness and vulnerability. No nation in its senses would add to its own weakness and vulnerability.

Not to halt now the withdrawal from Sinai is an act of historic irresponsibility — the more emphatically so in the light of Egyptian breaches of the peace treaty and its obvious intention to join actively in the campaign for Israel’s further shrinking and ultimate elimination as soon as the Sinai bastion is safely in its hands.

A halt to the withdrawal must however, be accompanied by a drastic change in internal policy, tightening of the national and the individual belt so as to reduce Israel’s economic dependence — and, to these ends, the formation of a government of national unity to face and withstand the storm already whistling and growling around our country and our people.