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### Engagement of convenience

“ISRAEL AS a Strategic Asset” was the title of an article in the American monthly *Commentary* last June. There, Professor Steven Spiegel, of the University of California, presented a detailed comparison of the relative contributions of Israel and the Arab states to U.S. security in the Middle East.

Summing up, he wrote: “A hard look at the potential allies of the U.S. in the Middle East returns us to Israel as the only country in the region upon whom we can rely.”

Thereupon, he added a crushing analysis of American policy, concluding his charge in a dramatic passage:

“In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the Monarch foolishly relinquishes his kingdom to two daughters who flatter him with expansive but false promises of everlasting devotion while he disowns his one faithful daughter, Cordelia . . .

“The analogy with America’s current Middle East policy is compelling. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which offer friendship but will not cooperate with U.S. defence or diplomatic efforts, are regarded as crucial allies, whereas Israel – which offers facilities and services – is progressively treated as a pariah, a candidate for economic sanctions and political alienation.

“King Lear destroyed his life, his family and his kingdom because he could not judge between friend and foe. The moral for the United States is obvious.”

Four months later, the events of October 23 provided a grim illustration of Spiegel’s theme: the U.S. refusal of Israeli offers of immediately available treatment for the marines wounded in the Beirut explosion that morning.

An hour-by-hour reconstruction of that tragic day, painstakingly prepared by Congressman James H. Scheuer of New York, revealed (as Scheuer wrote) that “during a 12-hour period on Sunday, October 23, the Israelis repeatedly contacted American officials at every level possible with offers of assistance – equipment, rescue teams and a first-class hospital. No one took them upon the offer, despite the fact that the decision-makers in Beirut and in Washington knew, as that terrible day dragged on, that our evacuees were not going to reach definitive care hospitals in less than 10 to 23 hours . . .” (*Baltimore Sun*, November 18, 1983).

Despite obfuscation and prevarication by members of the defence establishment – trenchantly described in Scheuer’s article – the Washington policy-makers’ decision to risk lives, certainly to increase and prolong suffering, among their own soldiers was indisputably dictated by a desire, as one Pentagon spokesman did let slip on October 24, “not to infuriate the Arabs.” Fate thus cast a penetrating light on the totality of years’-long U.S. policy in the Middle East – designed ostensibly to strengthen deterrence of Soviet penetration, but in fact governed by the principle of not “infuriating the Arabs,” of appeasing and fawning upon them, of encouraging them to continue the flow of petrodollars . . .

BARELY SIX WEEKS after that bloody day in Beirut, Premier Yitzhak Shamir and Defence Minister Moshe Arens returned from meetings in Washington with President Ronald Reagan and his advisers, beaming with euphoric smiles and making encouraging

statements about agreement reached on increased U.S. economic aid, on possible enhanced trade relations and – the crux of the agreement – about providing for a degree of strategic consultation and cooperation (including the prepositioning of U.S. supplies in Israel). The whole agreement was enveloped in an unconcealed consensus on the common interest of Israel and the U.S. in deterring Syrian belligerence and blocking the expansion of Soviet power in Lebanon.

IN SHORT, an apparent reversal of U.S. policy. For seven years, Washington fostered the Syrian involvement which undermined Lebanese independence, transforming the Beirut government into a puppet of Damascus. It stretched out a protecting arm to the PLO – which used Lebanon as a base for attacks on Israel's civilian population, established Lebanon as the central headquarters of international terror, and subjected its population to a reign of rapine and murder.

Washington worked to frustrate every Israeli effort to break the power of the PLO. It successfully pressed Israel in 1981 (at Arafat's behest) to stop its offensive against PLO bases, thus giving Arafat his breathing space to prepare, with Soviet aid, a new, massive offensive against Israel; and indubitably thus forced upon Israel the Peace for Galilee operation in 1982.

That operation laid the foundation – at great cost to Israel – for tremendous objective advantage for both Israel and the U.S. It destroyed the PLO base and structure; it established conditions for renewed Lebanese independence; it clipped the Syrian wings.

These gains were largely undermined by the application of traditional American policy – dancing to the Saudi tune, urging the Lebanese president to distance himself from Israel, exerting pressure on Israel calculated to prevent the completion of its speedy military success.

The result was a prolongation of the war, delay in crushing the PLO; the Syrians were enabled to recover, with Soviet aid, from the severe blows they suffered in their brief effort to stay the Israeli advance; and tremendous encouragement was given to all the warring sects in the country.

As the American Liberal weekly *The New Republic* pointed out (August 1, 1983):

“Pressing the Lebanese to embark on a clear path of peace with the Israelis . . . would have been the clearest possible sign of U.S. support for a strong, independent and neutral government in Beirut. By doing precisely the opposite, we signaled the Lebanese factions that they might, with our indulgence, continue to business as usual – violent and anarchic business.”

A rational policy of cooperation with Israel in the fall of 1982 would have consolidated mutual gains and averted much suffering; and would arguably have ruled out the sending of U.S. marines to Beirut.

Such were the sins of Washington, compounded by a fatuous belief in a Saudi “moderating” influence on Damascus – and by recurrent pliancy of the Israeli government. Then, entangled in the web of Lebanese reality, horrendously illumined by the tragedy of October 23, Washington woke up to the fact that the only hope of credibly confronting Syrian ambitions was by forging a framework for cooperation with Israel, in belated recognition of the common interest in Lebanon.

IT IS, thus, no secret that the Washington agreement is an engagement of convenience, with a view to helping the U.S. out of the muddle into which it was landed by its obsessive traditional policy.

But it is absurd and hypocritical to hint or pretend (as Labour Party spokesmen have done this week) that the proposed cooperation with the U.S. conflicts with Israeli interests. It is an Israeli interest to prevent Syrian domination of Lebanon – which is but an installment in its design to include all of Palestine, on both sides of Jordan in “Greater Syria.” It is an Israeli interest to have a peaceful, stable, independent and friendly Lebanon as a neighbour. If Washington has finally awakened to its own interest in these objectives, the people of Israel (including the Labour Party) may permit themselves to share in Shamir’s and Arens’s satisfaction at the Washington agreement; and to hope and pray that it will succeed in its purpose.

NOT FOR a moment, however, must it be forgotten that the American turnabout on Lebanon is a “local” aberration from its traditional policy. It does not signal a change in Washington’s attitude, unchanged for so many years and indeed obsessive, on the crucial issue of Israel’s future. It persists in its intention to press Israel to withdraw to the 1949 Armistice Lines and bring about Arab rule in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

In the recent talks in Washington, too, Reagan did not forget to reiterate, albeit briefly, his expectations of “his” plan, nor to repeat the cliché that the “settlements” are an “obstacle to peace.”

This laconic reference serves as a further reminder – and warning – to Israel. There are now signs that the administration may find it possible to remove the Reagan Plan from the back burner before the presidential election. It depends on Hussein. There are signs that Hussein may succumb to American blandishments (including the promise that Israel will be subjected to immediate pressure to “freeze the settlements” and to agree to open the subject of Jerusalem). He would then announce, with or without Arafat’s consent, his willingness to negotiate. On the basis, of course, of the Reagan Plan – which Jerusalem has rejected as an invitation to suicide.

If this happens, the pursuit of the plan (with the slogan of “Reagan the Peacemaker”) could become a central theme in the Republicans’ election campaign.

The vigour of such a campaign – to which the Democrats would have no convincing reply in view of their own record – may be imagined.

A wise government in Jerusalem, instead of merely basking in the warmth currently flowing from Washington, would, even at this late hour, hasten to effect a drastic revision in its information policy; and pre-empt the administration’s campaign by creating a belt of resistance to the Reagan Plan within the American community.

Should Hussein again reject Washington’s wooing, Israel will have more time to prepare such pre-emption.

The campaign for the shrinking of Israel will merely be postponed until after the presidential election (possibly re-clothed, of course, in a “Mondale” plan, or a “Glenn” plan.

WILL THE Shamir government erase, at long last, the ongoing *hasbara* blunders of its predecessors?