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House of cards

A PERTINENT comment on the Reagan Administration's current posture on the Arab-Israel dispute appeared last week in the *Wall Street Journal*. The major problem is of recent diplomatic activity in Washington, said the paper, was that it has been "ignoring the Israeli dimension."

This is a good diplomatic way of describing the discourteous, supercilious, even harsh attitude that has run like a red thread through Washington's behaviour towards Israel in the past few months.

The same issue of the paper indeed quoted a frank explanation for the behaviour proffered by an official of the administration: "*We hold the cards,*" he said, "*and we shall play them.*"

The official was making a mistake in his senses. Washington, believing it holds the cards, has already been playing them for some time. Its most glaring move was President Ronald Reagan's marked failure to acknowledge that it was Israel that had achieved the liberation of Lebanon from the political yoke of the Syrians and the barbaric terror of the PLO, and that the release had been achieved by Israel at a heavy cost in lives.

In American population terms, Israel's dead would number some 27,000. Reagan's "omission" was calculated for a political end.

Ever since that speech on September 1, Washington has indeed been doing its utmost to ensure that as far as possible Israel's sacrifice shall have been in vain.

THAT IS the "card" the U.S. has been playing in Lebanon. There it has been insisting that the U.S. should be accorded the status of a "full partner" in the negotiations.

There is, of course, no justification for according it such status. It did not do any fighting. That the U.S. should now have the decisive voice on relations between Israel and Lebanon is preposterous; and it has already been doing its utmost in support of the Lebanese Moslem point of view.

Whatever the U.S. and the Lebanese would hatch up together would have to be accepted by Israel. Moreover, it is no secret that America hopes, by the threat of depriving Israel of at least some of the fruits of its sacrifice in Lebanon, the Israeli government will be cowed into accepting the Reagan plan for the "West Bank."

Indeed, this scenario, no doubt thought up by some bright would-be Machiavelli in the State Department, is probably the reason for Washington's sudden concern for Lebanon, whose seven-year-long agony it watched without moving a muscle.

The Lebanese are, it is true, torn by internal dissent and are, moreover, being pressed by the Arab states not to reach any substantive agreement with Israel. Those states naturally wish to leave as many doors open as possible for a renewal of hostile activity against Israel from Lebanon. The most persistent purveyor of pressure is Saudi Arabia; and to Washington, the word of Saudi Arabia, in this region, is law.

There is, however, no reason why the Lebanese should not now stand firm against these pressures. They should not hesitate to address themselves to the Arab states roughly as follows:

It was you who originally drew us into this bog. You pressed us into giving the PLO shelter and into allowing them to use our territory as a base for operations against Israel. For 10 years, the PLO kept up a campaign of destruction and murder against the civilian population of northern Israel and sporadic attacks deeper into the country – not to mention the gradual conversion of our capital into a centre for international terror.

For all this, Israel could, if it wished, hold us responsible, as an ostensibly sovereign nation responsible for whatever actions are carried out from its territory. The Israelis however recognize that since 1975, Lebanon has not had a free, independent government.

When Israel destroyed the PLO structure in our country, the Lebanese people, for so long subjected to their terrorism and extortion, began to breathe once more the air of freedom and to nurture the hope of independence. They hailed the Israeli Army as liberators; and you know, as we know, that the Israelis do not want the burden of maintaining an army in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, they insist on arrangements that will ensure the prevention of a renewal of activity against them; and the establishment of a “good-neighbour” relationship between our two peoples.

There is every reason on earth why they should insist. There is no reason why we should refuse; unless we are prepared to have their troops (as well, probably, as Syrians and the PLO) on our soil for an indefinite time.

We certainly do not intend to resume the role of battleground in the conflict with Israel. We, of all people, need peace; an agreement with Israel is a vital ingredient of such peace; and you should respect our desire for it and desist from trying to hinder its achievement.

Nor should the Lebanese hesitate to make a similar statement to the Americans, who – in all friendship, of course – are patently using Lebanon as a pawn in their campaign to squeeze Israel out of Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

WASHINGTON’s ignoring of “the Israeli dimension” has been most evident on the subject of the Reagan plan (which was shown to the Arabs and to the leader of the Israeli opposition before being conveyed to the prime minister). One would not dream, from the variety of statements and prognostications coming out of Washington that the plan deals with territory held by Israel, firmly and perfectly legally.

True, Israel’s outright rejection of the plan is mentioned occasionally, but usually only in order to emphasize that the small matter of Israel’s rejection will not deflect the president.

The show of confidence is, of course, in the first place propaganda, a legitimate effort at intimidation. Nevertheless, Reagan’s forces are well-organized. The Europeans are all arrayed, ready to lambast Israel for not agreeing to this U.S. version of their own Venice Plan for the reduction of Israel to a state of maximum vulnerability.

Hussein of Jordan, hoping for sophisticated arms from the United States, may well come forward with an announcement of readiness to “negotiate” – provided Jews stop settling in Judea and Samaria and that Israel binds itself in advance to withdraw from “all the territories.”

Reagan clearly hopes that a substantial body of support for the plan will be engendered within Israel, by the Alignment opposition.

True, very few of them seem to have read the plan itself.

If Shimon Peres has indeed read it and still talks of its favourable points, he is notably not quoting chapter and verse from the text. The precise weight of internal support for the plan cannot be assessed, but Reagan's strategists in the State Department are right to take it into account in the final reckoning.

The scales in that final reckoning, however, will be tipped by economic pressure. Israel must expect economic sanctions if it refuses to accept the Reagan Plan as the basis for solving "the conflict." There can be no doubt that in the drawers of the State Department there is a ready-made plan for squeezing Israel economically in areas where the Congress will be unable to intervene.

YET, THERE is no reason to be intimidated by the administration's strategy. The cards available to the Israeli government are stronger; but they must be played immediately. The first card is the Reagan Plan itself. Its central feature is support for the transfer of Judea, Samaria and Gaza to Arab hands. The vast majority of the people of Israel will not accept such a plan, and if the Labour Party persists in hinting that it supports it, the Labour party will lose votes.

Secondly, there is no reason why sufficient support should not be mobilized in the U.S. against a plan whose consummation would demonstrably threaten Israel's very existence.

Finally, and how often must this be repeated, Israel is in vital need of a comprehensive austerity plan to reduce its dependence on U.S. aid; and this must include a contingency plan against the threat of "sanctions."

Meantime, it may be said to the anonymous official in Washington, that what he "holds" may turn out to be no more than a fragile house of cards.