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Lessons for Reagan

INTERIOR MINISTER Yosef Burg propounded a significant idea this week. He expressed opposition to any IDF withdrawal in Lebanon before Premier Menachem Begin's visit to President Ronald Reagan. He reasoned that the subject discussed in Washington would thus be IDF withdrawal; and Begin would not be subjected to pressure on other subjects.

Dr. Burg speaks from experience. The picture of a militant White House team bearing down on, and intimidating, an Israeli prime minister discomfited and often cowed, has been manifest time and time again in the past.

IT WOULD, however, seem no easy matter at this juncture for the U.S. president to talk down to the prime minister. There has never before been such transparent disarray in Washington on the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Seldom has the U.S. establishment looked so sheepish. Even after the debacle in Iran it was said that it was "merely" the U.S. intelligence services on the spot which had failed to read the developing signs and to measure and weigh the strength of the contending forces.

Here, in the Palestine dispute, a whole doctrine, a complete political system, has been proved hollow. Suddenly, decades of organized ignorance and built-in prejudice in the State Department itself – habitually puffing its cheeks in pretended omniscience – has been exposed to the world at large.

Nevertheless, there are signs that with the collapse of the Reagan Plan, the administration is casting around desperately for some course of action, some credible posture of self-confidence, and it is very possible that it is looking to Begin's visit to provide the opportunity for such a demonstrative act.

At least one of the unslumbering high priests of the State Department's traditional anti-Israeli attitude – former policy-maker Harold Saunders – has already been urging the administration to apply the unchanging nostrum: bullying Israel.

Sheer logic, however, and Israel's interests dictate the painting of a completely different scenario. Not only should the prime minister not run away from "pressure," but the time and circumstances are ripe for him to take the initiative and to bring "pressure" to bear on Washington.

What could be clearer than the need for a thorough reassessment by Washington both of its current ongoing policy (at present in a shambles) and of its root perception of the whole dispute and its place in the Middle East theatre?

Such "pressure" will mean, first of all, the uttering of some home-truths about U.S. policy in Lebanon. It is absurd to discuss Lebanon without dissecting U.S. attitudes and behaviour over the seven years before 1982.

During that period, the U.S. actively promoted the cause of violent Syrian overlordship in Lebanon and provided encouragement to the "state within a state" (with its concomitant regime of murder and rapine) built up by the PLO. While Lebanese independence was thus undermined and destroyed, the U.S. never once demanded or worked for the "withdrawal of foreign forces" from the country, or lifted a finger for the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty.

Throughout that period indeed, as the Ford-Kissinger regime was succeeded by Carter, and Carter by Reagan, the dominant and recurrent theme in U.S. policy was to press Israel not to take retaliatory action that might weaken Syrian and PLO influence in Lebanon, and to stifle any policy that might give the Lebanese a chance to restore their control over their own country.

When, finally, Israel – in a vital act of defence of its own territory and people against the PLO – forced the issue and opened up the possibility of a gradual revival of the wilted flower of Lebanese sovereignty, it was the U.S. that counterworked Israel's efforts. It is no secret that in the negotiations between Israel and the Lebanese government, it was the U.S. prodding Beirut to stand out against Israeli proposals for the establishment of normal relations that delayed, and frequently paralyzed, progress; that in the result gave the Syrians – and the Soviets – the time they needed to rebuild their positions and to create the obstacles they now present to the realization of “Lebanon for the Lebanese.”

In short, it is demonstrable that a prime factor in today's Lebanese mish-mash has been Washington's misreadings and miscalculations.

Such a summing-up is not a polemical exercise. It is a live case-history demonstrating the fatuities of U.S. policy and the grounds for a completely new American look at the Middle East.

PRECISELY because President Reagan is regarded as a friend of the Jewish people it should once and for all be pointed out to him that U.S. policy towards Israel has, broadly, always been rooted in pro-Arab perceptions. It has rested on the pretence of ignorance of the Arab doctrine of “ownership” of every inch of territory between the Persian Gulf and the Atlantic Ocean, and ignorance of the endorsement by all the Arab states of the aim of Israel's elimination contained in the PLO's Palestinian Covenant. Its pretence includes complete unawareness of the physical attempts to annihilate Israel; and complete forgetfulness of the fact that on each of these occasions the United States did not lift a finger to come to Israel's aid.

American policy hitherto has taken no account of the fact that for 19 years (1948 to 1967) Judea and Samaria were in the hands of the Arabs, illegally annexed and ruled by Jordan.

Yet nobody (not even the PLO) then even hinted that here was the home of a “Palestinian people,” thirsting for self-determination. Nor do the American policy-makers remember that precisely the control of the territory by Jordan made attractive the idea of war on tiny Israel.

The absence of Jews from Judea and Samaria after 1948 did not bring peace. It brought war – in 1967.

For an American president to persist in the demand that Jews refrain from making their homes in Judea and Samaria because it is not helpful to the peace process is not only to perpetuate one of the great hoaxes of the century, and an attack on the national rights of the Jewish people in its homeland; it is an insult to the intelligence.

ONE OTHER ISSUE on which the prime minister should take the American establishment gently to task is precisely its plan last autumn to effect a kind of coalition, with Hussein and Arafat on the one hand and with the Labour opposition in Israel on the

other, with the object of pressing Israel's elected government into accepting the "Reagan Plan," or into resigning from office. (This was the plan ultimately torpedoed by Hussein and not all the Saudi king's men even tried to save it.)

The President and his entourage may be surprised to learn that it is a fallacy to assume that there is a fundamental difference on the basic security issues in Israel between Likud and Labour. The Labour idea of a "territorial compromise" is grounded in the principle that, militarily, Israel must retain control of all of western Palestine. The area they would hand over to Jordan would have to be demilitarized. Moreover, according to their "Allon Plan," the strip along the Jordan would be sovereign Israeli territory; and other areas in Judea and Samaria (such as the Etzion bloc) would equally be Israeli territory; and Jerusalem would remain united under Israeli sovereignty.

Nobody in Israel, except the Communists and the lunatic fringe on the left of the Labour Party, is prepared to withdraw into the death-trap of the 1949 Armistice Lines.

IF THE United States wishes to avoid further embarrassing debacles it must make up its mind first of all that at this moment there is no "solution" to the Arab-Israeli dispute; and that if it wishes to help bring about a solution in the course of time it must insist that the Arab nation give up its purpose of annihilating the Jewish state; that it content itself with its own 22 component states, and that the Arabs of Palestine content themselves with their one state in eastern Palestine, called Jordan.

If the residents of western Palestine prefer to be citizens of Israel, they will be able to enjoy equal civic rights as well as cultural and municipal autonomy.

Holding out such a prospect is purely more closely in keeping with the American ethic than its present promotion of Arab doctrines and policies which, it so happens, aim at the destruction of the State of Israel and the attempted dispersal or genocide of its people.